



雪峰山脚下的生与死： 一个湖南农村少年的童年

Living and Dying at the Feet of the Snowy Mountains

尹大龙 Yin Dalong with CK Stuart

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SUMMARY: Children in contemporary rural China have experienced an unprecedented moment; amid radical economic and social transformations that have sent their parents to urban centers to earn cash income, children have been left behind to live with older relatives. This fundamental redefining of place, parenting, and living has rarely been written about by the children themselves in English. Set in rural Hunan in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, this novel vividly describes farm production, the shift from an agricultural way of life to a life financially supported by migrant labor earnings, local religious life, Huagu opera, education, complex and violent relationships between family members and villagers, the deaths of the protagonist's (Maomao) mother and paternal grandmother, a wedding, funerals, and local festivals – from the perspective of a child. Refusing to drop out of school and become a migrant worker or a soldier, Maomao eventually achieves his dream of becoming a university student against all odds. This unvarnished and vividly written description of a contemporary rural life in China is uniquely important and appealing to a broad readership.

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NOTICE

This novel's characters and events are fictitious. Any similarity to real people, dead or living, is coincidental and not intended. Certain places have been invented and do not exist, for example, there is no Suzhou Normal University.

本小说中的人物与情节均属虚构。若有雷同，纯属巧合。个别地名是作者编的，例如，现实中不存在苏州师范大学。

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Yin Dalong (b. 1988) is a native of Hunan Province, China. He graduated in 2012 with a BA in English from a Chinese university, continues to write creatively, and teaches middle school students English.

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NAMES

C

Chen Huahua, deskmate

Cui Zhang, Zhu Maichen's wife

H

Han Xin, Han Dynasty general

L

Lady Yang, neighbor

Li Zhidong, maternal grandmother

Liu Hu, trickster

M

Ma Qi, primary school classmate

Ma Zhe, primary school arithmetic teacher

Maomao, Wu Yangyang's nickname

Mr. Chen, villager

Mr. Ferman, a retired American pharmaceutical salesman

Mr. Long, beggar and Wu Yangyang's surrogate father

Mr. Ma, middle school physics teacher

Mr. Zhang, sister's husband

Ms. Guo, junior middle school Chinese teacher

W

Wang Jing, village kindergarten teacher

Wu Jinmei, sister

Wu Long, primary school arithmetic teacher

Wu Yangyang (Maomao), protagonist

Wu Zhiyuan, father

Y

Yao Beibei, village boy

Yao Cai, neighbor boy

Yao Chang, head teacher in primary school

Yao Cong, paternal uncle

Yao Danghua, maternal uncle's wife

Yao Daoguang, water buffalo dealer

Yao Faming, Li Zhidong's second husband

Yao Gua, paternal cousin

Yao Guihua, neighbor
Yao Jiajia, villager
Yao Jiawei, primary school principal
Yao Lanfang, paternal aunt
Yao Liwen, Yao Faming's brother
Yao Mingguang, Yao Zhiqiang and Yao Zhiwei's father
Yao Pan, paternal cousin
Yao Shenjie, middle school classmate
Yao Tongyu, Lady Yang's granddaughter
Yao Wenge, villager knowledgeable in pump operation
Yao Zhiqiang, village boy, Yao Zhiwei's brother
Yao Zhiwei, village boy, Yao Zhiqiang's brother
Yao Zhougai, water buffalo dealer
Yao Zhouhuai, old villager
Yaohui, Wang Jing's daughter

Z

Zhang Jiabao, junior middle school teacher
Zhang Lan, mother's sister
Zhang Lei, mother's brother
Zhang Rui, mother
Zhang Wan, maternal cousin
Zhang Wan, trickster
Zhang Yu, maternal aunt

YAO FAMILY VILLAGE

Hunan Province lies in south-central China, south of the middle reaches of the Yangzi River and south of Lake Dongting. This explains Hunan's name, which means 'south of the lake'. Hunan is also known as 'Xiang' after the Xiang River, which runs through the province. Hunan, with a population of about sixty-six million people, is China's tenth-largest and seventh most populated province. Imagine a place with twice the land area of Iceland with the population of France – this is Hunan. Hunan borders Hubei ('north of the lake') in the north, Jiangxi to the east, Guangdong to the south, Guangxi to the southwest, and Guizhou and Chongqing to the west. Changsha City is the capital. More than six million ethnic minority citizens live in Hunan, including members of the Tujia, Miao, Dong, and Yao ethnic groups. Mountains and hills make up more than eighty percent of the province. About twenty-five percent of the land area of Hunan Province is at an elevation above 500 meters and much of that exceeds 900 meters. The western highlands run southwest to northeast, forming the eastward edge of the Guizhou Plateau.

Yao Family Village is located in East Gate County, in the center of Hunan Province, about 300 kilometers from Changsha. In 2012, the county had a population of about 800,000. The village is near the Snowy 'Xuefeng' Mountains, the highest and longest mountain range in Hunan Province. Situated in the heart of the province, the Snowy Mountains are an extension of the Guizhou Plateau and are crisscrossed by deep river valleys. These mountains are made up of sandstone, slate, and quartzite.

Hills in the vicinity of Yao Family Village are of various shapes. Rather than standing alone, the hills are connected and resemble rows of waves. The hills are always green thanks to the pine, fir, and camphor trees that grow there. In autumn, deciduous trees such as maple interspersed among the evergreens lend vivid streaks of color.

Water is another distinguishing characteristic of the area. Fourteen lakes of different sizes are linked by streams. Three kilometers to the west runs Stone River, which originates in the Snowy Mountains. Lakes and rivers provide fish, irrigation water, and fun.

Yao Family Village has about 1,000 people of whom nearly all are Han. The few Yao and Miao residents are women who married local men and then moved into their husbands' homes. Most villagers lived in adobe and wood houses around the beginning of the twenty-first century but, with rapid economic growth, more people have been building brick and concrete houses, which are more durable and considered to be more comfortable.

Eighty percent of male villagers are surnamed Yao and have lived in the village for a long time. My family name is Wu – we are one of the other twenty percent. My maternal grandmother, Li Zhidong, settled in the village in 1961.

•••

Before 1961, my paternal grandfather and grandmother, together with their children – my elder aunt, and my father, Wu Zhiyuan – lived in Blue Mountain Village, about fifteen kilometers from Yao Family Village. My paternal grandfather was a straw-sandal maker. When famine gripped East Gate County in 1960, my grandfather and thousands of others died of starvation. To make things worse, a fire burned the family's wood home to ashes a few weeks after his death. My paternal grandmother then had no choice but to leave the village and remarry.

Meanwhile, the wife of Yao Faming of Yao Family Village died while giving birth. My paternal grandmother married Yao Faming and settled in Yao Family Village with her seven-year-old daughter and three-year-old son (my father).

Later, Yao Faming asked my paternal grandmother and father to take his family surname, but my paternal grandmother refused on the grounds it would demonstrate unfaithfulness to her former husband. My father was consequently the only male in Yao Family Village surnamed Wu.

Grandmother gave birth to two more children – my uncle, Yao Cong (b. 1965), and my aunt, Yao Lanfang (b. 1968). Thus, by 1968, there were six members in the family.

After the births of my uncle and younger aunt, Yao Faming began to treat my elder aunt and my father badly. Even though my elder aunt had reached school age, Yao Faming did not allow her to attend school because, he reasoned, she would leave home when she married and wasn't worth the investment. Father started primary school in 1967. When he was in grade two, Yao Faming forced him to stay at home and help with farm work, despite my paternal grandmother's pleading to let him continue his schooling. Father thus became a main provider for the family from the age of twelve.

Yao Faming was very fond of my uncle and younger aunt and seldom scolded or punished them. They both completed nine years of study.

Father had a miserable childhood. From 1966-1976, all of China suffered from the Cultural Revolution, and Father suffered from hard work. He fetched water for the family every morning and evening from a well 150 meters from their home. He also had to work in the fields, tend swine, and water buffalo, and fetch firewood.

Father was twenty-three in 1980 and unmarried because his family was very poor, and because he was functionally illiterate. Almost no matchmakers came to the home because everyone knew Father's wife would have a life of hardship.

Grandmother worried about Father's marriage because there would be no descendants if Father never married – no descendants for him and none for Father's father. Local villagers continue to believe that their sons must marry and have children because if they don't, the family line ends – a situation which is considered a terrible shame. My paternal grandmother was joined in her determination to find a wife for Father by Yao Faming, who was tired of other families scorning him because Father was unmarried.

A new adobe house was built on the slope of Cow Hill about a hundred meters from the old wood house where they lived. It was not finished for nearly two years. Next, my paternal grandmother asked one of the best village matchmakers to help Father. This resulted in Father being introduced to my mother,

Zhang Rui, then a twenty-year-old in Sunny Mountain Village, in the autumn of 1982. She was beautiful but her right leg had been injured in an accident when she was eighteen. She and her husband were travelling in a bus along a narrow dirt road. The driver was going much too fast. In a sharp turn, the driver unexpectedly met an oncoming tractor, swerved, and the bus plummeted thirty meters into a dry riverbed. Mother's first husband, whom she had wed only two weeks before, died from his injuries, while she lost the use of a leg and afterwards had to use a walking stick. Mother's disability and being a widow were major obstacles in her remarrying, though she was pretty and usually dressed attractively. When introduced to Father, she appreciated his hardworking character and sincerity, though he was short and had little formal education. Meanwhile, Father was eager to have a wife, and had few expectations other than that she be able to give birth.

Father and Mother married in the winter of 1982 and lived in the new adobe house. Mother gave birth to her first baby – my elder sister, Wu Jinmei – in 1984. Though Mother was delighted with my elder sister's birth, other family members were not. In fact, my paternal grandmother was sad and angry because she had expected a boy.

Girls are locally considered to be inferior to boys because they will leave home and belong to other families when they marry, while sons will stay and care for the parents when they are old and ill. Families often do not celebrate a baby girl's birth and the mother is criticized until she bears a son. The extended family is delighted with the birth of a son. At this time a big feast is held, and the mother is praised and gains much new respect.

Desire for a son and heir has grown stronger because of the government's One Child Policy. But though there are substantial fines for violating the policy, old traditions die hard, and local people do many things to ensure a son. Tragedy is all too common – some women are beaten and some are deserted because they do not bear sons. Some little girls are abandoned in the streets by their parents because they are female. Some of my female friends, for example, were abandoned outside the village and then adopted by village families.

Mother was mistreated after giving birth to my elder sister and few relatives came to express concern. Grandmother lived only a hundred meters from the new adobe house, but refused to visit and care for Mother, though she was in great need of help, which ultimately resulted in the souring of their relationship.

2

MY BIRTH

The family expected Mother to give birth to another baby but the One Child Policy had been in place since the late 1970s. A mother could not have a second child without official permission. Those who violated this law were heavily fined. If they could not pay, their house was torn down by officials. Our family was poor and having a son by breaking the law would mean becoming homeless. Father thus decided to try and get official permission which, as expected, was not an easy task.

Yao Liwen, my step-grandfather's younger brother, was a village leader, and responsible for determining if a couple could legally have a second child. One night, Father took some local liquor and two kilos of cooked fatty pork to Yao Liwen's home. After some hours of drinking and chatting, Yao Liwen told Father, "You can have a second child only after your first child is four years old, and you must promise not to have a third child. Also you or your wife must be sterilized after the second child."

Father agreed after some thought and, a month later, he received the birth permission.

The extended family happily expected a son when Mother became pregnant again in 1987. Sister was delighted at the thought of having a companion to play with and Father worked harder to earn more money to buy nutritious food for Mother, hoping for a healthy, plump son.

I was born on the tenth day of the fourth lunar month. When the doctor declared the infant was a boy, Father's delight defied description. He swore that I would never want for anything and that he would send me to school regardless of the cost. My paternal grandmother also visited Mother, despite their earlier quarrel. I was treated very much like an emperor and three days after my birth, a celebration was held in our home that was attended by nearly all our relatives who extended congratulations and best wishes.

Mother was soon less delighted because I didn't sleep well at night, was very energetic, and cried a lot. Father and Sister were also disturbed by my noisy wails. Something had to be done to stop me from crying so often.

Father took me to a doctor, but he could do nothing useful. Then, an old lady, whose son had also been a fretful child, told Mother that I might be possessed by devils.

Mother trusted her and asked her what should be done. The old lady said, "You need to find a nominal father to drive the devils away and protect your son from potential harm."

Nearly all noisy, troublesome children in my village have nominal fathers, who are usually unmarried, middle-aged or older men. My parents decided to find one for me. A beggar surnamed Long came to our village one day asking for food. Father happened to know the beggar was unmarried and thought that he was a suitable nominal father. Father invited Beggar Long to our home and gave him a good meal. Of course, Beggar Long was very pleased. When Father asked Beggar Long to be my nominal father, he accepted immediately; perhaps he thought this would lead to more food.

A simple ritual was then held. Chicken, pork, and fish were cooked in the biggest room of our adobe house, and put on the shrine as an offering to family ancestors. The shrine is a place to pray and show respect to the ancestors. It is often in the home's biggest room. Beggar Long knelt before our shrine and promised to my family's ancestors that he would take good care of me and protect me from devils. Next, Beggar Long took me in his arms, murmured, and gave me the name 'Maomao'.

As expected, I cried much less after this ritual and Mother was able to rest better. My family was very grateful to Beggar Long, who frequently visited, though he lived in distant Black Dragon County. He brought candies for me each time he came. Beggar Long's visits were happy times for me. He was very kind, played with me, and was very good at making funny faces. Father always gave him food and local liquor when he was about to leave. I cried at his departure and hoped he would visit again soon. After I was twelve years old, I never saw him again. I'm not sure why. Maybe he died.

Time passed peacefully and then it was time for my first birthday. Locals think first birthdays for sons are important and a celebration is often held. Father held a grand birthday party for me. Many of our relatives and villagers attended, bringing nice presents including eggs, clothes, and hens to express best wishes.

After all the guests gathered, a ritual called 'One-Year-Old Catch' was held in the biggest room of our adobe house. A blanket is put on the floor during this ritual. Toys, pencils, writing brushes, books, abacuses, coins, flowers, pine tree branches, food, and small hoes are put on the blanket for boys. Scissors, thread, and scoops are added for girls. Next, the parents put the baby in front of the blanket. Nobody cues the baby – it grabs whatever it likes from the items at hand.

If the baby chooses brush pens, pencils, or books first, the baby is likely to be a scholar. If the child grabs an abacus, the child will be very good at calculating and finances. A girl baby who first grabs a sewing item or cooking utensil will be a good housewife. On the other hand, if the child grabs a toy, flower, or candies, it will know how to enjoy life's pleasures.

Parents, together with relatives and villagers, watched intently as I crawled towards the articles in front of me. They cheered when they saw me grab a brush pen. People believed that I would be a good student, strengthening Father's determination to send me to school.

3

MY EARLY SCHOOL LIFE

I began attending the kindergarten near our village in autumn 1994. I excitedly looked forward to making new friends and having fun. The kindergarten was attached to Yao Family Primary School, which was about one and a half kilometers from my home. The only teacher was our neighbor, Wang Jing, who was very kind and a good friend to Mother. She often came to visit and they often sang together. Mother was sure I would learn a lot from Mrs. Wang. My parents believed she was an excellent teacher, as did other village parents.

Two other boys and three girls who lived near my home were also sent there that autumn, including Mrs. Wang's daughter, who was my age. We six often walked to and from school together.

Frankly, I learned very little. Mother expected me to learn to read, write, and calculate, but after a year in kindergarten I couldn't read a single character, let alone write one. When I was asked what one plus one equaled, I would think for several moments before giving the right answer. There were forty children in the class and I was often ranked thirty-seventh.

Nevertheless, I enjoyed kindergarten. Mrs. Wang had many talents. She was a senior middle school graduate, unlike most adults her age in our village, and she taught us many songs. Her voice was as sweet as Mother's and she was able to sing more songs than Mother. She had a thick notebook of lyrics. We were delighted when we were about to learn a new song and sang the songs we had learned after class. The first thing I did when I returned home in the afternoon was to sing the new song I had learned for Mother, who was always pleased to hear me sing.

We were all silently spellbound when Mrs. Wang played the electric organ. I often fell asleep while listening.

Mrs. Wang also taught us various dances. We sang when we danced. Children who danced well were awarded beautiful red paper flowers that Mrs. Wang made. I was eager for such a reward

and practiced very hard. My efforts often paid off with me getting the most red paper flowers of all the boys in our class, and also earning Mother and Mrs. Wang's praise.

Three weeks before Children's Day on June first, Mrs. Wang said, "Maomao, you are very good at dancing. Do you want to perform on Children's Day?"

I nodded affirmatively.

"OK. The township education bureau is sponsoring a dance competition in the township center town. Our kindergarten has been invited to participate. You and nine girls must stay after school every day and practice from today on," Mrs. Wang said.

I said nothing. I was surprised that only one boy was to dance in the competition. I also felt honored because I was that boy. Meanwhile, I thought it would be very embarrassing for me to dance with nine girls and I was afraid my classmates would ridicule me.

Mrs. Wang understood, smiled, and said, "Ignore what others say about you, OK? You're the only boy in the class that is qualified for the competition. You dance better than many girls in our class, which is why I chose you. Trust yourself! You can do it!"

Mrs. Wang's words motivated me and though I still felt a little embarrassed, I agreed to practice. We each wore a yellow dress and had red flowers on our head. I looked just like a girl and was often mistaken for one. Once when I went to the school bathroom, the boys inside screamed and ran out.

We practiced a dance called 'Small Swallows' for about two hours every afternoon. We played the part of ten swallows and our dance lasted about seven minutes. We also sang a song named 'Small Swallows' as we danced, which was challenging. Mrs. Wang was very patient, but also very demanding. We had to be very careful with each movement. Whenever one of us made a mistake, we had to start from the beginning. We sweated and our muscles were sore.

Children's Day came and Mrs. Wang escorted us to the Shijiang Township Cinema in a tractor-trailer. Many of our classmates and family members came to support us. Father also came with some peaches and told me not to be nervous.

The competition began at nine a.m. We performed very well, which the audience acknowledged with enthusiastic applause

and cheering. We were awarded the second prize, which was the first time our kindergarten had won such a prize. Mrs. Wang was very pleased and we children were very proud of ourselves. My other classmates were also very excited. Several boys who had made fun of me offered congratulations. My parents were so happy that Father bought me ice cream and Mother cooked a big delicious meal to celebrate my success in the dance competition.

My life in kindergarten soon ended. After playing for about a year, I became a grade one student in Yao Family Primary School in autumn of 1995. There were six grades in the school with one class per grade. Most of my former classmates continued to study, while a few children attended the township primary school, which was seven kilometers from our village; their parents thought that teachers in the township primary school were superior to those in the village school.

We were sad that Mrs. Wang no longer taught us. Middle-aged Mr. Wu Long became our head teacher. Mr. Wu was thin, dark, wore glasses, and smoked a lot, which explained his yellowed teeth and stained lips. He looked weak, but was very energetic. He had a loud voice and was admired by nearly all the villagers. He was seen as a serious, responsible teacher. Most of his students studied well, and Father and Mother were glad to know Mr. Wu was my teacher.

There were eight teachers in the school, five of whom were from our village. Unlike most teachers, Mr. Wu's home was two kilometers away in another village. His elder sister was married to a man in our village, who often beat her cruelly. Mr. Wu may have chosen to teach in our primary school to be near to her and protect her.

On the first day of the new semester, Father accompanied Sister and me to school to the pay tuition fee, which was about one hundred *yuan* per student for each semester. This was a heavy burden for Father and Mother. Father met Mr. Wu and said, "Teacher Wu, my son and my family's future are now in your hands. I know you are a very responsible teacher, so I beg you to be strict with my son. If he doesn't listen to you, beat him as hard as you want."

I was standing next to Father and hated him for saying that. I guessed my days of kindergarten fun were gone forever.

Mr. Wu smiled and said, "No problem! I will try my best to teach your son." Then he patted my head and smiled. I was very afraid of him and ran away.

Primary school was less interesting than kindergarten because we didn't dance, though we often had drawing classes and sang. Mr. Wu was a poor singer and drew terribly. Our main subjects were arithmetic and Chinese, which were taught everyday, Monday to Friday. The mid-term and final exams only tested arithmetic and Chinese. We studied numbers from zero to nine and some easy calculations. We also learned to write and pronounce *pinyin* and some simple Chinese characters.

There were about forty students in our class. About half were boys and half were girls. Some students who had studied poorly the first year in grade one were repeating the same grade. Two students shared one wood desk and a wood bench. Both the desk and the bench were about one meter long. There were two drawers for our school bags and books under the desktop. Mr. Wu made the seating arrangements. Short students sat in front of the class and tall students sat in the back. I was neither short nor tall, so I sat in row three. A boy was supposed to sit together with a girl because Mr. Wu believed that this arrangement reduced chatting between students. My deskmate was strong, plump Chen Huahua whose parents had gone to Guangzhou to work – a typical story in our village. She lived with her maternal grandparents, whose home was about 400 meters from the primary school.

A lot happened between Chen Huahua and me. Instead of talking little, she and I talked a lot. We soon became good friends and had a lot of fun together. I often shared with her the delicious lunches that Mother cooked for me, while she brought sweet peaches. She even invited me and some other students to her home when her grandparents were out. We often climbed up the hills near our school and caught butterflies and grasshoppers in the afternoon after classes.

There were also bad times. She was fat and took up so much of the desk that it was difficult for me to write. I even drew a line

down the middle of the desk and Chen Huahua promised not to move across the line, but she often did anyway, which irritated me.

I also made her angry. After lunch, we were required to sleep for an hour in the classroom. Boys slept on the desks while girls slept on the benches. My snoring irritated Chen Huahua and I sometimes fell off the desk on top of her, which sent us both crashing to the floor.

In the end, we couldn't tolerate each other. I fell on her again, while sleeping one afternoon. She lost her temper and scolded me. I punched her in the face. She fought back, beat me, and tore some of my books into pieces. Other students woke up and watched excitedly. Fortunately, Mr. Wu was not in the classroom.

I thought it was shameful to have been beaten by a girl and asked my friend and neighbor, Yao Cai, to help me teach Chen Huahua a lesson. After school, Yao Cai and I secretly followed Chen Huahua. When we walked near a hill, we ran up and beat her. Yao Cai kicked her in the stomach and she cried. Yao Cai and I laughed, and happily ran back home.

Trouble came quickly. While I was having supper with my family that evening, Chen Huahua and her grandmother arrived. Chen Huahua's maternal grandmother walked briskly, wearing an angry face. Mother warmly welcomed them and invited them to join us for supper. Chen Huahua's maternal grandmother refused and said angrily, "Your son beat my granddaughter today. I am now here to ask you to educate your son."

Mother was furious to learn that I had beaten Chen Huahua. I was about to run away, but it was too late. Mother caught me and beat me with her walking stick until I cried. Only then were our visitors satisfied and left.

I learned a lot from Mr. Wu and improved through his efforts. I was the sixth best student on the mid-term exams. Students ranked one to four were awarded notebooks and pencils. Though I did not receive an award, I was excited at having moved from thirty-seventh to sixth place. I became more confident in learning. When I had problems, I asked Mr. Wu for help. He patiently explained what I should do and encouraged, "I'm sure you'll do better on the final exams!"

After school, I often asked Sister, who was in grade five, to help me with my studies. I said to myself, "I must get the first prize in the final exams."

When the final exams approached, I was very ill from chickenpox with a high fever. Blisters covered my body. I was so weak that I could hardly speak or walk. Though wrapped in a thick cotton quilt, I still felt cold. I was not allowed to go to school in fear I would infect other students. My worried parents took me to the best doctors in our village and Father bought bananas and apples in town for me. I was still very sick on the final exam day. Then Sister and Yao Guihua, a neighbor girl who is Sister's age, took turns carrying me to school on their backs. When I finished the final exams, they carried me back home.

I did very badly on the exams. I was too weak to write much, my mind was muddled, and I fell asleep during the exams. When the results were announced, I ranked thirty-eighth among forty students. Though I was ashamed, Mr. Wu smiled and said, "Nevermind! You were ill, but you still weren't last. Great!" My parents also didn't punish me but instead, comforted and encouraged me to continue to study.

Mr. Wu taught us for a semester, and then left the school for four years because he was ill with a liver disease. Mr. Yao Chang then became our head teacher. He was taller and older than Mr. Wu; as an unofficial teacher, his salary was much lower than that of regular teachers. He had once been a regular teacher with a full salary but, after having a second child and violating the One Child Policy, was demoted to the rank of an unofficial, poorly paid teacher. Because of his low salary, Mr. Yao had to cultivate rice and vegetables to make ends meet.

Mr. Yao taught us all our subjects and was as strict as Mr. Wu. Students who talked or slept during class were required to stay after class to clean. Mr. Yao was quite humorous – he made faces and told jokes – and wrote Chinese characters beautifully on the blackboard. I liked and admired Mr. Yao Chang and often brought a big orange to the classroom in the morning and put it on the podium as a gift. Later, other students did the same, delighting Mr. Yao.

With such a good teacher, I was even more eager to be the best student in my class. Every morning, I was the first inside the classroom, read my texts repeatedly, and could recite all my texts from memory. When I returned home, I recited the lessons to Mother who listened intently and was suitably impressed.

I was number one on the mid-term exams and earned much praise from Mr. Yao and the schoolmaster, who rewarded me with a dozen pencils, four nice notebooks, a pen, and a certificate of commendation. I was ecstatic to receive such recognition and rushed home after school to tell Mother. When I got home, I found Mother ill and in bed, but she perked up upon hearing my good news. She kissed me, touched my face with cold fingers, gave me five *yuan*, and said, "Go buy whatever you want. If you get the first prize again on the final exams, I'll give you twice that amount."

I accepted the money excitedly and rushed out to the nearest village shop to buy some candy, chewing gum, and a can of soda.

ESCAPE

Father often did construction work outside the village to earn money during the daytime. Meanwhile, Mother spent most of her time at home because of her disability. This meant I had little supervision and enjoyed much freedom when I was little.

Villagers found many ways to evade the One Child Policy because they believed that the more children they had, the better. The predictable result was that there were many children in our village. We had a great time playing hide-and-seek, catching bees and crickets in grassy areas, fishing, and swimming in lakes and rivers.

I loved swimming and often spent the whole day in the water. My parents opposed my swimming because they thought it was dangerous. Each time Father learned I had been swimming, he caught me and tied me to the big pine tree in front of our house. Mother then came, scolded me, and beat me with her walking stick. The forbidden nature of this activity only made me more eager to swim and to do it as secretly as possible.

I often walked with other village boys for about twenty minutes to a pool surrounded by hills. Adults seldom came there. When we saw people approach, we dove into the water to avoid detection. Sometimes, however, village girls played by the pool after gathering mushrooms in the hills and reported to our parents if they saw us.

I hid under my parents' bed whenever I was awaiting punishment. One evening, I was tired and fell asleep. Mother was going to punish me, but it was already dark and I hadn't been detected. Mother, Father, and Sister all went out searching, but their efforts to find me were fruitless. After hours of searching, Mother returned and cried in bed. Later, she heard my snores from under the bed and was so relieved she only laughed, as did Father, who pulled me out from under the bed. Fortunately, Mother did not beat me that time – maybe she was too exhausted.

Soon, hiding no longer worked. Mother realized I would return home when I was hungry no matter how long I hid. She beat me even more harshly if she knew I had hidden after I swam, which meant I had to find other ways to enjoy swimming.

The summer of 1994 was unexpectedly hot. Village boys – even some male adults – went to nearby pools and rivers to cool themselves. One afternoon, Ma Qi, the only son in his family, and two other boys went to the pool we usually secretly swam in. The pool was deep after days of rain. Ma Qi was a poor swimmer, suddenly had cramps, and vanished under the pool surface. His two companions were horrified and rushed back to inform village adults, but it was too late. Ma Qi's body was floating on the pool surface when the rescue team arrived.

Ma Qi's parents were devastated and all the villagers were shocked. Parents became stricter. Mother threatened to beat me to death if I dared swim again. I was frightened. Nevertheless, one afternoon three days after Ma Qi's death, I went to swim with Yao Zhiwei, a boy a year older than me who lived near my home. We played happily in the pool until I saw Sister standing on the bank. "Brother, come here!" she shouted.

I was scared, but loved swimming so much that I couldn't stop. Sister continued yelling and Yao Zhiwei and I continued swimming. Sister left angrily. I was sure she was going to report to Mother. We continued splashing in the water until we felt tired and hungry. I said to Yao Zhiwei, "I want to return home."

"Do you want to die? Your mother will surely beat you," Yao Zhiwei said.

"No, I don't want to die. What should we do?" I said.

Yao Zhiwei said nothing, just sat on the bank, pulling up grass. I began crying. Just then Yao Zhiwei excitedly jumped up. I felt quite annoyed and asked him why he was so excited.

"I have an idea! Let's leave home! Do you know the mountains?" he said, pointing to the high mountains in the remote west.

I shook my head.

"They are the Snowy Mountains. They're about twenty kilometers from our village. My uncle and aunt live there. There are many frogs and snakes in the mountains that we can catch and sell

for high prices. Why don't we go there and make a living by catching frogs and snakes?" Yao Zhiwei said.

Yao Zhiwei was skilled at catching snakes. Actually, all his family members were good at it. His father often roamed the mountains and fields on warm days, hoping to find snakes. A one-meter long snake was worth ten *yuan*, which explained why many villagers went snake-hunting when they had time, even though certain snakes were poisonous. I was very afraid of snakes, like most village children, and shook my head.

Yao Zhiwei then said, "I know you disagree because you're afraid of snakes. Well, I'll teach you how to catch them. Most snakes are not poisonous and catching them is great fun."

I then imagined how much money I could make to buy toys and sweets, and how pleasant it would be to be free from Mother's scolding and punishment. The more I thought about it, the more attractive this idea became. "I will be free of Mother's beatings and can do whatever I want," I thought. After some hesitation, I agreed to run away with Yao Zhiwei.

"Where shall we live? Will we build a house for ourselves?" I asked.

"Yes. There are many big trees in the Snowy Mountains. We can easily build a wood house for ourselves, and Uncle will help us. But right now, we don't need to build a house because we can live in Uncle's home."

Thus the first big adventure of my life began. There were no buses so we set out on a twenty kilometer trek with as much determination as two little boys could muster. We walked through about forty villages of varying sizes. The people we met along the way looked at us in surprise. When we were tired, we stopped and rested for a short while and when we were thirsty, we went to the nearest wells and rivers to drink. We stole peaches, grapes, and watermelons growing near the road when we were hungry. Some adults chased us when they discovered us stealing but, luckily, they didn't catch us.

We eventually came to a large orange orchard with ripe fruit. We both wanted to eat oranges to quench our thirst. We slipped into the orchard and picked big oranges excitedly. I ate one very sweet orange. Yao Zhiwei suggested filling our pockets with

oranges. Just as we were about to pick more, a big middle-aged man entered the orchard and shouted, "What are you doing!?"

We tried to flee but the man shut the orchard gate. Soon, a woman joined him, tied us together, and took us into their home. The man asked us who our parents were.

"We have no parents. They deserted us," I replied.

Yao Wei added, "We're going to the Snowy Mountains to make a living by ourselves. We have nothing to eat. We're really hungry and that's why we steal. Sorry, but it's the only way we can stay alive."

The man was amused by our answers, and admired our courage. Instead of asking us to return the oranges, he put more oranges in a large plastic bag, gave them to us, and wished us good luck.

We thanked him and continued our journey. We reached a wide river after another hour of walking. Uncle's house stood just three kilometers to the west. The river was about a hundred meters wide and many cows and water buffalos were grazing nearby. The river had no bridge, so we knew we would have to swim across. We had never swum across such a wide river before and hesitated. We stood on the bank looking at each other, trying to think of a solution, and then we saw a water buffalo walk to the other side of the river.

"The river must be very shallow if a water buffalo can walk across," Yao Zhiwei reasoned.

Without further hesitation, I removed my T-shirt and shorts, and held them in my left hand. Yao Zhiwei did the same. We then walked into the river. The water was much colder than water in the pools of our village. We felt much refreshed by the cool water and frolicked in the river. We found many fish and shrimp in the river. Yao Zhiwei dove into the water and quickly caught a big fish. "I have another idea – we can catch fish as well as snakes and frogs! See, it's so easy to get fish!" Yao Zhiwei said, releasing the fish.

"Yes, and we can have fish for food," I added.

The sun was setting. Darkness was coming. We had to hurry and cross the river. The water was not very deep and flowed slowly near the bank, so we were fine at first. As we moved away from the

bank, however, the water became much deeper and the current faster. I tried to swim back, but it was too late. I just couldn't turn around. I then tried to swim ahead, but I was pushed back by strong waves. Water entered my mouth, and I nearly choked. I felt uncomfortable, and began to lose control of my body. Fast flowing water carried me downstream. More water came into my mouth. I felt I was dying. I had so many dreams waiting to be realized. I regretted having left home. I struggled and screamed, "Help! Help!" several times, until more water poured into my mouth. It was harder to breathe. I looked around and saw Yao Zhiwei farther downstream than me. He was about to drown. He was silent. I was sure we would die. I was suddenly grasped by two strong hands belonging to a stout woman in her forties. She smiled, put me across her shoulder, and strode out of the river. She did the same for Yao Zhiwei.

We lay naked on the grass. We had both lost our clothes. I trembled from the cold and was too weak to speak. Yao Zhiwei lay unmoving. He seemed to have lost consciousness. The woman resuscitated Yao Zhiwei and, after about fifteen minutes, he began moving. She then took us to her home and gave us some of her children's clothes, hot water, and cakes. We were soon able to walk and speak normally.

"I thought you were fishing. The river is very dangerous. Four little boys have already lost their lives here this year," she said.

I was quite shocked, and felt very grateful.

"We weren't fishing. We are going to Uncle's home. We had to swim across," Yao Zhiwei said.

"OK. Who is your uncle?" the woman said.

Yao Zhiwei then told the woman Uncle's name.

"Oh, you are his nephews! You must be from Yao Family Village. My elder sister lives in your village," she said. She told us her sister's name and then we learned Yao Zhiwei's paternal grandfather's younger brother's wife was her elder sister.

"Your sister is actually our relative!" Yao Zhiwei said excitedly.

She told us she had not seen her elder sister for many years, so we then told her some things about her sister and her family. She became friendlier and offered to take us to Uncle's house.

After a half-hour walk in the dark, we reached Yao Zhiwei's uncle's home. They had gone to bed and their house was dark. The woman knocked loudly on the door for some moments and then shouted, "Mr. Ma, your nephews have come to visit you! Please open the door!"

Lights came on and Uncle opened the door. He was nearly naked and a bit annoyed. He greeted us and invited us inside. Aunt also got up. She was happy to see us, though quite surprised.

"Oh! Dear boys, we are so glad to see you, but why have you come so late at night?" Aunt asked warmly.

The woman explained what had happened. Aunt then thanked her for rescuing us and asked her to stay for a meal, but she politely declined and soon left.

Aunt and Uncle were surprised by our visit. Then Yao Zhiwei explained that our parents wanted to beat us to death and we had escaped. We told them our future plans, which so amused Aunt that she laughed heartily.

We asked if we could stay at their home for some days until we had built our own wood house. Uncle agreed and offered to take us fishing the next morning. Realizing we hadn't had supper, Aunt cooked delicious noodles for us, which we ate quickly and then went to bed.

Uncle woke us up early the next morning and took us to a river about half a kilometer west of his house. He carried a net and two plastic buckets. We reached the river and then stepped into a boat. Uncle cast the fishing net skillfully while we sat in the boat, enjoying nature's beauty. The rising sun's soft rays were reflected on the rippling water surface. The world was beginning to awaken.

The sun was high in the sky after about an hour and we began to feel hot. Uncle then expertly began drawing the net into the boat. We were amazed to see many fish. Yao Zhiwei and I helped put the fish into the two buckets that were soon full. I then resolved to go fishing every morning with Uncle. This was, however, not to be because three days later, Father and Yao Zhiwei's father suddenly arrived. Yao Zhiwei and I were surprised and frightened by their sudden appearance, hid in the bedroom, and listened intently as they chatted with Uncle and Aunt.

"We have been looking for them since they escaped some days ago. We put up notices everywhere, but our efforts were in vain. Fortunately, we met the owner of an orange orchard yesterday afternoon, who told us that he had seen two little boys going to the Snowy Mountains. We guessed they must be our sons and then thought they were probably here," Yao Zhiwei's father said.

"Yes, you're right. They have been here for four days and plan to live here, which amuses us," Uncle replied.

Aunt then told them how we had been saved by the strong woman, who had taken us to her home. They listened intently. Father thanked them for taking care of us.

Yao Zhiwei and I were then asked to return home. We refused because we loved our new, free life and didn't want to return and be punished. At last, Uncle told us we were too young to fish and we should go to school, which he described as much more interesting than fishing and swimming. Our fathers also promised that we wouldn't be harshly beaten. Relieved, we agreed to return. When we got back home that evening, many boys came to visit Yao Zhiwei and me. They admired us and thought we were heroes.

Instead of being angry and punishing me, Mother was delighted to see me again. She held me in her arms and kissed my cheek. I noticed that her eyes were red but, when I asked why, she just silently smiled.

Sister said coldly, "Mother has been crying the entire time you have been gone. That's why her eyes are red."

I felt much regret. Only then did I realize how important I was to my family and especially Mother, who had threatened to beat me only because she wanted to protect me.

"Sorry, Mother. I promise not to disappoint you again," I said.

Mother then suggested I go outside and play.

5

LOSING MOTHER

I got first prize again for scoring highest on the final exams. However, Mother didn't keep her promise. She didn't give me ten *yuan*. She died a month before I took the final exams.

Mother had been weak ever since her accident. Her parents tried their best to cure her. Grandfather carried Mother on his back to many hospitals. Some hospitals were very far from their home and Grandfather had to walk for several days. They met difficulties and dangers on the way. They often ran out of money and food, and had to beg. One rainy day, when Grandfather was crossing a wood bridge with Mother on his back, he slipped and they both plunged into the river below and nearly drowned.

Grandfather also went to a high mountain forty kilometers from their home to fetch a bottle of spring water for Mother. It was said that this spring water could cure countless diseases and many people went there to get some of this miracle water. Grandmother believed Mother didn't recover fully from the accident because devils had possessed her, and so she invited local spirit mediums to their home to ask ancestors to descend from Heaven and exorcise the devils.

All these efforts were in vain. Mother used a walking stick for the remainder of her life. She saw doctors frequently, which was a burden for my grandparents, who had four children – Zhang Lei, Zhang Yu, Zhang Lan, and Mother. They expended the most resources in caring for Mother. My maternal grandparents were very relieved when Mother married Father.

Mother only needed to do housework at our home and care for Sister and me. Father earned money outside the village and, when he returned home, he gave it to Mother, who decided how to spend it.

Mother spent a lot of money on doctors' visits and medicines. Her bedroom table was covered with medicine bottles of varying sizes. She gave some empty bottles to me, and I put coins in

them. Mother also bought Chinese herbal medicines, boiled them, and then drank the resulting brew.

Mother enjoyed life when she felt good. She cooked nice food and bought beautiful clothes for herself, Sister, and me. Neighbor women came to our home to chat, sing, and play cards. They often played cards till midnight when Father was away. Mother was not good at card games and lost a lot of money.

Because Mother was careless with money, Father could never make enough. Sometimes she secretly sold rice cheaply to businessmen. Father then angrily scolded her, "How dare you sell our rice so cheaply! Rice is our life!"

Mother retorted, "What should I do if you don't give me enough money?"

Father said nothing. He went outside, sat on a rock, smoked, and then buried his head in his hands and wept. I quietly observed Father from a distance and felt sorry for him.

Father worked very hard doing construction work in town along with other men from our village. He carried bricks upstairs and mixed sand with cement. He seldom came home. Sister and I really missed him. When he did return, he handed Mother a large sum of money and brought candy for Sister and me.

Mother was careless with money when Father was away. Many peddlers came to our village to sell clothes, brushes, crockery, ribbons, pork, sugar, and eggs. These peddlers often visited our house because Mother bought something from them every time they came. She believed their goods were cheap, and she enjoyed chatting with them. Sometimes, she even invited the peddlers to have lunch to blunt her loneliness and to hear news.

She also went to town by pedicab because her disability did not allow her to walk to town comfortably. Sister and I accompanied her and helped carry the clothing, wool yarn, apples, bananas, cosmetics, shampoo, soap, and so on that she bought. These goods were expensive. She shopped so often that many shopkeepers became familiar with her and thought she had a rich husband.

The fact was, of course, that we were poor, though Mother tried to live a life of luxury. Mother, Sister, and I wore nice clothes and Mother used lipstick and face powder, which few village

women wore, to look more attractive. Mother paid special attention to what she ate. Fruit was always available in our home, and we often ate chicken, pork, fish, and eggs.

Mother cared little about Father. She often bought clothes and made shoes for herself, Sister, me, and my maternal grandparents, but seldom did so for Father and Father's parents. When he returned home, the food she served declined in quality and meat was seldom in the dishes she prepared. Mother washed the clothes for our family; her clothes were very clean after being washed, while Father's were still dirty.

Mother began asking Father for more money, which annoyed him. He was curious about how she spent the money when he noticed the increasing quantities of clothing and cosmetics she bought.

"Wife, please spend less. I'm not rich, you know," he would say.

Mother refused to listen, and continued enjoying herself, which made many village women jealous. Their husbands made more money than Father, but they couldn't enjoy the relatively carefree life Mother led. Besides caring for children and doing housework, they also had to work in the fields. Some women also denigrated Mother, saying she was a bad wife and put an unnecessary burden on Father.

Grandmother also thought Mother was a bad wife. Grandmother had experienced great poverty in her life, which had taught her the merits of frugality in daily life, regardless of wealth. She angrily scolded Mother for squandering money, "You waste a lot buying useless clothes and cosmetics. Stop such bad behavior!"

Mother hated my paternal grandmother after giving birth to Sister, because she thought she cared little for her. "It's none of your business, Mother!" she retorted.

"Your money is my son's. How can you say it is none of my business? I don't want to see him working day and night only to make a selfish woman happy!" Grandmother shouted furiously, tossing many of Mother's beautiful clothes on the floor and throwing her cosmetics out the window.

Mother felt very sad and wept.

"If you dare continue to waste my son's money to buy cosmetics and expensive clothes, I will throw them away again and ask my son to divorce you!" Grandmother screeched and stormed out.

Their relationship deteriorated after that and they often quarreled. Grandmother scolded Mother for using too much washing powder when she washed clothes, while Mother hated Grandmother for being partial to Aunt Yao Lanfang.

Father loved his mother more than his wife and believed that regardless of how parents treated their children, they should respect them and never find fault. When Father learned Mother had quarreled with Grandmother, he scolded her for being foolish, became angry, and beat her.

Grandmother scolded Mother one day in September 1995 for selling rice cheaply. In the evening, Father returned home and Grandmother told him about what had happened. Father then went into the bedroom where Mother was singing while knitting a sweater for herself. He shouted, "Fool! Did you quarrel with Mother again?"

Scared, Mother nodded, and mumbled, "Yes, but she scolded me first."

Enraged, Father grabbed the unfinished sweater, threw it on the floor, and then caught Mother's arms. She screamed, resisted, spat in Father's face, and bit his arm. Father went insane, threw her to the ground, kicked her, and hit her head with his fists.

Mother cried and pleaded with Father to stop but he didn't listen and continued beating her.

I was frightened and cried. I was enraged to see Father beating Mother, who was so much weaker. I wanted to be very strong so that I could beat Father and protect Mother from being beaten to death. I ran to some neighbors' homes and asked them to save Mother. Soon many neighbors gathered near our house. Several men rushed into the bedroom and pulled Father outside.

I ran to Mother. Her nose was bleeding. I brought a towel and pressed it to her face, trying to stop the bleeding. She looked at me, held me in her arms, and we both sobbed. Neighbor women joined us and comforted Mother.

Mother informed her parents and her brother that Father had beaten her. Uncle Zhang Lei visited our home and threatened that if Father dared beat Mother again, he would pay some local gang members to beat Father.

Mother and Father's relationship worsened after that and they slept separately. Father slept with me, and Mother slept with Sister. They seldom talked to each other. This cold war lasted until Mother became very ill.

Father worked outside as usual, but he gave Mother less money when he returned. Gradually, he began to drink and smoke. When he was at home, he often went to drink local homemade liquor with other village men at night. He often got drunk and when he returned home he would shout and smash things like glasses and cups, which terrified Sister and me and made us cry.

When Father didn't go out to drink liquor, he often sat on a rock in front of our house, smoked, and seemed lost in thought.

Mother didn't scold Father for drinking and smoking, and though Father gave her less money, she still enjoyed life. She continued to wear beautiful clothes and cosmetics and to have good food. Mother began buying on credit because she was on such good terms with shopkeepers and peddlers, who thought she had a rich husband. Mother often said when she was shopping, "I don't have enough money on me. My husband is out doing business these days. I promise I'll pay as soon as he returns." The shopkeepers trusted Mother and allowed her to take goods away on credit.

Months passed and Mother didn't pay her debts. Some shopkeepers and peddlers came to our home and urged her to pay. Mother then ordered Sister and me to watch outside our house and alert her if strangers approached. She hid behind her bedroom door when we told her shopkeepers and peddlers were approaching. When the shopkeepers and peddlers asked Sister and me where Mother was, we replied, "Sorry, Mother has gone to Grandmother's," and then they would angrily leave.

Mother no longer dared shop in town. Instead, she asked neighbors to buy things for her when they went shopping.

Yao Jiajia, a businessman who sold herbal medicine, was very kind to Mother and often helped her buy things. He went to town everyday to do business and, when he returned, he often brought what Mother had asked him to buy, and seldom asked her to pay.

Yao Jiajia is five years younger than Father. Tall and strong, he was a soldier for three years, and both his parents were township government officials. Yao Jiajia also had a beautiful wife and a son. However, he didn't get along with his wife, who had left him and gone to work in Guangzhou.

Mother was very appreciative and often invited Yao Jiajia to our home for meals when Father was away. He happily came and brought sweets for Sister and me, just like Father. He and Mother chatted and laughed for hours. Yao Jiajia was humorous, and told jokes and stories to Sister and me. We were entertained by his accounts and asked him to tell another story when he finished one, and he would comply. Sister and I were very fond of him and eagerly anticipated his next visit.

Yao Jiajia and Mother grew closer and he sometimes stayed the night. Father was away and didn't know about Mother's affair, but neighbor women noticed and, when they met me, would ask, "Did your Uncle Yao Jiajia stay with your mother last night?"

My answer was usually, "Yes," which earned me candy as a reward. News spreads rapidly and soon the entire village was gossiping in disapproval over Mother's affair. Mother was ashamed and dared not leave the house. Instead, she stayed inside knitting and sleeping.

Villagers soon informed Father, but he refused to believe it. Though he and Mother were at odds, he could not believe she would be unfaithful. This belief, however, was shattered when Father returned home unexpectedly late one night and heard a man talking in Mother's bedroom. Surprised, he listened, verified it was Yao Jiajia, angrily banged on the door, and shouted, "Open the door!" awakening Sister and me.

Mother and Yao Jiajia were both frightened by Father's sudden return. Yao Jiajia threw on his clothes and surreptitiously slipped out through the back door. In a rage, Father kicked the

door open and rushed into the bedroom where Mother pretended to be sleeping.

Father turned on the light, and shouted, "Where is the man who was here just now?"

Mother didn't answer, but got up and looked at Father with terrified eyes. Father turned and was about to leave the room when he noticed a pair of leather shoes under the bed that obviously belonged to Yao Jiajia. Mother's face turned red. Father picked up one of the shoes and beat Mother with it. Neighbors were awoken, got up, and came to our home to see what all the commotion was about.

Father then stopped and went into the forest by our home where his loud, sorrowful lamentations echoed throughout the quiet, empty valley.

My relatives soon learned what had happened and came to our home to scold Mother. Even Mother's parents were angry with Mother, who began to realize what a serious mistake she'd made. She finally knelt before Father, and begged, "Husband, I'm sorry. I swear to Heaven I'll never do that again!"

Father finally forgave Mother. Though there was still little communication, Father returned home more often than before and Mother was more frugal in spending. She also treated Father better, cooked good food for him, and knitted sweaters for him.

Grandmother, who was happy to see the change in Mother, now came to our home, and sometimes helped Mother do housework.

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Mother's abdomen began to ache – a pain that grew progressively worse. She was unable to sleep from the pain and had little appetite. Father took her to the township hospital where she was diagnosed as having terminal ovarian cancer. The doctor bluntly told Father, "Your wife is dying. Take her home and prepare her funeral."

Father then quit his job in town as a construction worker and stayed at home to care for Mother. Relatives came to visit, comforted Mother, and encouraged her to overcome the pain. Mother was happy to see them, and tried hard to chat. After school,

Sister and I replaced Father as caregivers. We often sat near her bed and sang, trying to cheer her up.

Mother knew that she would die soon and called Sister and me to her bed one rainy afternoon. She first said, "Jinmei, you are now a big girl. Take care of yourself and your brother after I die."

Sister nodded.

Mother then told Sister to leave and beckoned me to come near her bed. She smiled and asked me to sing 'Mother's Song'. I did, which made her happy. When I finished she said, "Call me 'Mother'."

"Mother," I said.

"Say it again," she said.

"Mother," I said.

"Excellent. You are a good son and a good student. Study hard and be a college student when you are older. I'll be very glad if you continue to be an excellent student."

I said, "Mother, I'll study hard. You won't die, right? You promised to give me ten *yuan* if I get first prize on the final exams. If you die, who'll reward me? You'll get well, right?" and then I started sobbing.

Mother said nothing, just gently stroked my face with cold thin fingers as it grew darker outside and raindrops noisily struck our roof with greater intensity. Lightning streaked through the night sky and thunder boomed, seemingly without letup. Mother trembled for a few seconds and then she died. Her hand fell away from my face.

"Mother! Mother!" I cried.

She lay unmoving.

Hearing my desperate wails, Father came and sobbed in great grief, "Wife, why did you leave so soon? Why?" Father sadly kissed Mother and covered her head with a red cloth.

It rained even harder.

We held a simple funeral in our home. Grandmother gave Father some money for the funeral because Father was penniless. Monks and spirit mediums were invited to our home to do rituals. Mother's body stayed in our home for only two days before burial. Mother's sweet voice was no longer heard, and the food was no longer delicious. I could not accept that Mother was dead. I often

cried when I was alone and dreamed every night of her teaching me beautiful songs in Heaven and cooking good food for me.

6

SISTER'S DEPARTURE

Mother's death was a serious blow. No matter how hard Sister and Father tried to comfort me, I still couldn't overcome my deep grief. I blamed Father for Mother's death. If only she had seen a doctor sooner.

Father became our caregiver, washing clothes and cooking. In the morning, he woke and helped dress me, and in the evening he bathed me and put me in bed. Sister didn't trouble him much and tried to help clean and wash dishes and clothes. Father also asked her to work in the fields and to water the vegetables on weekends.

Though Father tried his best to be both mother and father, I was unhappy. He couldn't cook delicious food nor did he wash my clothes very well. I often went to the graveyard, knelt before Mother's grave, and told Mother how badly Father treated me.

Thinking that my maternal grandmother loved me, I decided to leave home to live with her. One rainy Saturday morning, Father went out to work in the rice fields, while Sister washed clothes at home. I said to Sister, "May I go watch TV at a neighbor's home? I'll be back soon."

Sister was happy to see that I finally wanted to enjoy myself, nodded, and said, "Don't get wet!"

I took an umbrella and happily left. It was drizzling, the wind was blowing hard, and I was soon wet and cold. I reached Grandmother's home after half an hour of difficult walking. My grandparents, uncle, and aunt all came out to welcome me. I was excited to see them, threw my umbrella to the ground, and ran to Grandmother's open arms, crying, "I miss you!"

Grandmother was happy to see me. She bathed me and dressed me in my cousin's clothes. Then Uncle and Aunt cooked rice, pork, chicken, fish, and eggs. It was the first delicious meal I had enjoyed since Mother died. I ate so much it surprised them. After the meal, I was asked many questions.

"Why did you come visit today?" Grandmother asked.

"Because you are the only one who really loves me; I hate Father. I don't want to live with him," I said.

"Do you miss your mother?" Aunt Yao Danghua, a short, chubby, cheerful lady asked.

"Yes. I dream of Mother every night," I said.

"Will you let your father get a stepmother for you?" Uncle asked.

"No. Father treats me badly and I would suffer more if I had a stepmother," I said.

We chatted until bedtime. They were amused by my answers and often laughed. I felt happy to be the center of attention and to express my emotions. I wanted to live with them forever. I plucked up my courage, and asked Grandmother, "May I live with you? I don't want to return home."

"Of course! You can live with us for as long as you want," Grandmother said, as Grandfather, Uncle, and Aunt nodded. I delightedly gave Grandmother a big kiss and slept soundly that night.

The next morning after breakfast, Uncle, Cousin Zhang Wan, who is three months younger than me, and I went fishing in the brook in front of their house. Many fish had taken refuge here after their ponds had been flooded. Uncle placed a bamboo basket in a deeper place in the brook. Then we stepped into the water and drove fish into the basket. It was soon full of variously sized fish that we happily took home. Grandmother then cooked spicy fish and fish soup for us. Cousin and I hoped it would rain again soon so that we could catch more fish in the brook.

That afternoon, Aunt took Cousin and me to guard their watermelon field, which was the only watermelon patch in the village. Uncle hoped to make more money from selling watermelons than selling rice on two *mu*¹ of land that was generally unsuited for rice cultivation. Uncle and Aunt took good care of the field and watermelons grew well there. Many villagers came to their home to buy watermelons, keeping Uncle and Grandfather busy. Aunt often guarded the watermelons because some villagers,

¹ One mu = 0.067 hectares.

especially teenage boys, tried to steal them. Many watermelons had already been stolen, which angered Aunt and Uncle. To stop the thieves, they had built a hut in the center of the field and put a bamboo bed inside. During the daytime, Aunt stayed to watch the field, while Uncle was on duty at night.

We sat on the bamboo bed, and Aunt told us many stories and taught us some card games. Cousin and I learned quickly, and we then played cards with Aunt. We napped on the bed when we got tired. Aunt also went down to the field and brought us watermelons to eat when we were thirsty. I was very fond of watermelons and, though I was only eight years old, I ate a whole big one that afternoon. Cousin only finished half. Watermelon juice wet my pants while I was eating and soon my stomach was as round and big as a small watermelon.

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My happy days at Grandmother's home soon ended when Father came and said, "At last, I found you. Your teacher is angry because you are not attending school. Please come home and continue your studies."

I refused and tried to escape. Father then caught me and put me on his back. I cried and asked Father to put me down. He ignored me.

Grandmother gave Father a big watermelon and said to me, "Come visit me on weekends."

Afterwards, Father didn't allow me to visit Mother's grave alone and told Sister to watch me. I often visited Grandmother who cooked tasty food, gave me money, and encouraged me to study hard.

Father stopped doing construction work because he had to look after us. He was only forty and villagers suggested he remarry so that he would have more time to earn money. However, our poverty meant no woman wanted to suffer with us, and Father also did not want his children to be mistreated by a stepmother.

Father soon found work mining coal in neighboring Dry Wood Village. He worked eight to nine hours a day and thus had time to look after us and tend the rice fields. There was a big state-owned coal mine and about fifty small private mines in Dry Wood

Village. Explosions in the mines were common, especially in the private mines, and many men lost their lives. Though risky work, poor village men were attracted by the 1,000 RMB a month salary, which was a substantial sum at that time. A miner could earn even more in the state-owned coal mine, where conditions were better. However, only a few men in our village were able to work there because they lacked the personal relationships with the mine officials that would lead to employment.

Grandmother worried constantly about Father's safety after two men died in the private mine where Father worked. She then asked him not to risk his life to make money.

Father replied, "How do you suggest I support my family?" which rendered Grandmother speechless. She continued to remind him to be careful and often visited temples to pray for Father's safety.

Many other villagers who didn't want to be miners went to work in cities such as Guangzhou and Shenzhen. Some worked in factories, some were cleaners, and some women worked as hospital attendants. They made much more money than the adults who stayed at home. All of the village children visited them when they returned at the end of each year. They gave us candy they had bought in Guangdong Province and fascinated us with stories about life beyond the village. Their example suggested to other villagers that it was easy to make money in Guangdong.

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Eventually, many of my relatives left home and worked in Guangdong. Many became quite rich. My paternal uncle, Yao Cong, and his wife opened a restaurant in Guangzhou in 1997 that specialized in chopped duck pieces with Sichuan peppers and various dishes cooked with authentic, Hunan smoked pork. A year later, they had earned enough to build a new house. They returned home in winter, bought a big patch of rice land next to the small wood house they lived in, and hired construction workers to build a three-story brick home. Father also helped when he had time.

The house was finished in less than half a year and was quite different from the tile-roofed, one-story adobe houses most villagers lived in. Father still lives in such a house. Tile roofs often need

repair, because the tiles break, and then the roof leaks. In contrast, Uncle's house has a concrete roof with runoff diverted through drainpipes and rarely leaks. The flat roof is also used to dry rice, corn, peanuts, soybeans, and rapeseed.

Many were jealous of Uncle's new house. Even more people left and tried to earn enough to build houses similar to Uncle's. Color televisions, VCD and DVD machines, refrigerators, and telephones made villagers' lives more comfortable.

Father only worked as a miner for about half a year because he couldn't bear the poisonous fumes in the mine and often vomited after work. He became progressively thinner and weaker. At last, he became very ill. At that time, the mine boss visited, gave him 1,000 RMB, and fired him.

Our family was then left with only the income from selling rice. However, Father couldn't afford chemical fertilizer and insecticides, thus the yield was little – there was only enough rice to feed ourselves. Noticing others becoming rich, Father asked his brother and cousins to help him find a job in Guangdong, but they refused because Father couldn't speak Modern Standard Chinese and was illiterate.

Father soon got well but he still couldn't secure a permanent job. Some village elders asked Father to help them tend their crops and carry wood from the mountains because they were too weak to do so and their children had left the village. In this way Father earned about twenty RMB and three meals a day. This provided funds for fertilizers, insecticides, and taxes. The work was irregular and Father stayed at home tending our crops most of the time.

As my family grew poorer, others got richer. Father didn't have extra money to buy new clothes for himself, Sister, and me. My uncles gave Father their old clothes to wear, my aunts gave Sister their castoffs, and I wore my elder cousins' old clothes. Sometimes Grandmother and my aunts bought or made clothes for Sister and me, which made us happy.

Father couldn't pay our tuition, which was about 150 RMB per student each semester. Sister and I considered dropping out. Fortunately, teachers in our village primary school were very understanding and allowed us to first study at school without paying, and told Father to pay our tuition when he could. Father

still was unable to pay as the end of the semester approached. The teachers then unhappily urged Sister and me to ask Father to pay our tuition and finally came to our home and demanded that Father pay.

Father welcomed them inside. They were surprised at the poor condition of our gloomy house that featured only one electric apparatus – a single dim electric light bulb. We lacked enough chairs so some teachers had to stand while chatting with Father. The schoolmaster sympathetically said, "You don't need to pay the tuition this semester on the condition your children study hard."

Father thanked him and then all the teachers left. Sister and I were very grateful and resolved to study well.

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Father couldn't give Sister and me money to buy pens, pencils, and exercise books so we began gathering scrap metal, shampoo bottles, and insecticide bottles and sold them to rubbish collectors. In spring, Sister and I picked and sold tea leaves.

There is a towering mountain about a kilometer from our village and many adult women go there to pick green tea buds in spring for their own use and to sell to a tea factory at the foot of the mountain. Though the price was only a half *yuan* per kilo at that time, some women still made twenty *yuan* a day.

Sister and I picked tea leaves on weekends. We were not skillful, but we could make ten *yuan* or so in a half-day. Sister and I were proud of earning money by ourselves. We used it to buy pen, pencils, exercise books, and candy.

Peaches with edible pits ripened in autumn. Sister and I collected the peach seeds, cracked them open, and extracted the pits, which we sold to businessmen for one *yuan* per kilo. We searched for fallen peaches and also climbed up trees to pick peaches. Sometimes Sister and I could collect about twenty kilos of peach pits a day.

While other village kids were watching TV at home on summer nights, armed with a flashlight and a woven plastic bag, Sister and I went to rice fields to catch frogs that restaurants in town would buy. There were many frogs croaking in the darkness; Sister and I followed the croaks to find the frogs. Sister would shine

a flashlight on the frogs, paralyzing them, while I quietly approached and grabbed them. We spent about two hours a night catching big frogs this way and could get about five kilos of frogs a night, which we turned over to Father who then sold them the next day for about twenty *yuan*. In these ways we earned money for our tuition.

Realizing the opportunity to attend school was precious, Sister and I studied hard. Though we needed to earn money and work after school, we seized every second of our spare time to study. In our bedroom, which was also our study room, Sister wrote a famous Chinese proverb on the wall with a brush pen:

少壯不努力，老大徒傷悲

This translates as 'He who refuses to learn when he is young will regret it when he is old.' This was a constant reminder of the importance of study. Sister and I were top students in our school and we were awarded many prizes.

Sister finished six years of study in the village primary school in the summer of 1997. At that time, the policy dictating nine years of compulsory education was not enforced in our county. Primary school graduates had to pass the junior middle school examination to continue their studies. Sister did very well on this exam and was accepted by the best school in the county. In fact, that school only accepted three students in Sister's class. Sister's head teacher was very pleased, came to our home to congratulate her, gave her the admission letter, and said to Father, "Your daughter is very promising and has a bright future."

Sister was so excited by this news that she couldn't sleep. I was very proud of Sister and we began dreaming about the future. Sister said, "I will study even harder after entering junior middle school and I will probably eventually be a college student."

I said, "Yes, you will be a college student, have a very good job in a big city like Guangzhou, and make a lot of money."

"I'll buy many beautiful clothes for us and we won't have to wear others' castoffs," Sister said.

"Don't forget to buy me candy!" I said.

"I surely won't forget. I'll buy anything you want. You'll be the happiest brother in the world," Sister said.

Sister and I chatted for a long time that night.

Father, however, was unhappy. He called Sister and me the next morning, and said sadly, "You see, our family is poor. I can't pay for both of you to attend school next semester. I'll let you draw lots to decide who will continue to study."

I was very nervous because I really wanted to study, and to enjoy life with my classmates. However, I also wanted Sister to study because she was a very good student and had such a bright future.

Sister stood up and said to Father, "Let Brother attend school. He's only in grade two. He should learn more."

Father agreed, praised Sister for being so generous, then took Sister's admission letter and burned it, which made Sister wail loudly. I understood that Sister's dream was shattered and cried too.

The new term soon began that autumn and I became a grade three student. On the first day of the new semester, Sister said, "You are the only hope for our family. Study hard and excel!"

I replied, "I will surely study hard and not disappoint you and Father."

Nearly all of Sister's former classmates continued studying in middle school, which made Sister envious and sad. She visited her friends to hear about their life in middle school, and even borrowed junior middle school textbooks and brought them home to learn by herself. However, she had little time to spend on such study. Father went to town to do construction work while Sister, who was then only thirteen years old, cooked, washed our clothes by hand, fetched water, cleaned the house, and tended our crops and vegetables.

One day, Father brought two piglets home. Nearly every village family raised swine to sell in order to finance the cost of their children's education, fertilizer, and insecticide. Pigs are constantly hungry and must be fed often. But Father couldn't afford commercial pig feed, and there were no spare vegetables or rice. Sister thus had to gather wild grass for the pigs, which required much time and effort.

I took a big bamboo basket to the fields to gather grass with Sister after school. There was much wild grass but only certain young grass was suitable. I soon became adept at gathering grass and saved Sister some time. Some other village children did the same – we often gathered grass together. We chatted, sang songs, and played hide-and-seek in the fields. We even invented a game called 'beating pigweeds', which resembled a game of chance. We first dug a hole and put pigweed inside. Each child then threw a pebble from about five meters away. If a pebble went into the hole, the pigweed in the hole belonged to the thrower. Sister excelled at this game and won a lot of pigweed.

The fun of gathering grass and playing the game 'beating pigweeds' with Sister soon ended with Sister's departure to work in Guangzhou.

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Many of my relatives who worked in Guangdong Province returned home to celebrate the lunar New Year. They brought back what seemed to me to be great riches and were very proud of themselves for earning money outside the village. Aunt Yao visited us during Spring Festival, bringing me beautiful clothes and Sister attractive dresses and a pair of high-heel shoes. Knowing Sister had left school and was tired of working at home, she was very sympathetic. She held Sister's hands and tears welled in her eyes. She scolded Father, "Brother, how could you treat your daughter so badly? She's still so young and shouldn't be working this hard every day."

"I don't want her to suffer, either, but what do you suggest I do?" Father asked.

Aunt was lost in silent thought and then said, "What if I take Jinmei to work in Guangzhou?"

Father quietly listened and smoked.

Aunt continued, "I know a wealthy and kind old retired couple in Guangzhou looking for a maid. They are both over seventy. Their children are all working abroad, so they need to hire someone to care for them and do housework. Before I came back, they asked me to help them find a maid. They promised to pay the maid 300 RMB a month."

Father was interested but had some reservations. "Don't you think Jinmei is too young to work as a maid?" he said.

Aunt said, "She can be a good maid because she can read, write, and speak Modern Standard Chinese. Importantly, she does housework well and is unafraid of hard work."

Father then said, "Wonderful! With you also in Guangzhou, I have no other worries about Jinmei!"

Aunt then asked Sister if she was willing to work in Guangzhou.

Sister said, "Yes, but what will I do everyday?"

Aunt smiled and said, "You will cook, sweep rooms, and wash clothes."

"That's no problem! I'm an expert at housework," Sister said, "Must I work in rice fields under a hot sun?"

Aunt laughed and said, "Of course not! There are no rice fields in the city. You just need to stay at the old couple's home and care for them. They are very kind. I'm sure you'll enjoy your time with them!"

"Great! Thanks a lot, Aunt!" Sister said.

Sister and Aunt went to Guangzhou a week later. Sister was dressed beautifully and wore the pink, high-heel shoes Aunt had given her. My paternal grandmother, Father, and I accompanied them to the bus station to see her off. Grandmother was reluctant to let Sister go, cried a lot, and said. "Take good care of yourself! Remember to come back when I die!"

Father was unhappy with Grandmother for mentioning death, and said, "Don't say such bad things, Mother!"

Sister nodded, and said to her, "I'll take good care of myself. I'll miss you, Grandmother!"

Sister kissed me and said, "Brother, I'm leaving. Please take care. Study hard and don't associate with bad kids."

I nodded, and said, "When will you return?"

"I don't know, but I'll write you often," Sister said.

The bus was starting. Sister and Aunt boarded it and soon vanished in the shadows of the road that led to Guangzhou. Grandmother and I kept waving, even after the bus was long out of sight.

LOSING GRANDMOTHER

My paternal grandmother offered to care for me after Sister left to work in Guangzhou. Father, who was fully occupied by work, had little time for me. He thought this was a great idea, and took my clothes and toys to Uncle's house, where my grandparents lived. I then lived with my grandparents and two cousins. I only returned home and stayed with Father on weekends when he could spend time with me.

I didn't like living with Grandmother at first because Mother told me countless times how cruel she was and ordered me not to speak to her. I seldom visited her and knew little about her. She also rarely visited our home because she was busy with housework and caring for my two cousins, whose parents were both working in Guangdong. On my birthdays, my maternal grandmother came to our home and brought me candy, but my paternal grandmother never came. I thus concluded that she cared little about me, which instilled a strong, long-lasting dislike.

I refused to play with my cousins and often refused to eat, though Grandmother was a very good cook. I cried loudly at night. Meanwhile, Father was fully occupied tending crops and working for others. I interpreted this to mean that he had more or less discarded me. I missed Mother and Sister and began to feel that no one in the world loved me. Some afternoons, when my grandparents were away, I secretly visited Mother's grave, knelt before it, tearfully told Mother how miserable my life was, and asked her to bless me and change my fate.

After living with Grandmother for about a month, I began to realize she was not cruel. Instead, I found she loved me. She cooked every meal, washed my dirty clothes, and occasionally bought candy for me. Though she was strict with me, not allowing me to swim in rivers and pools and only allowing me to visit my maternal grandmother once a month, my dislike for her began to melt away.

I was the oldest grandson and was asked to help do housework. I made the fire and tended it while Grandmother cooked. During this time, Grandmother told me the history of our family and confided that she had become an orphan at the age of three. She encouraged me to overcome the pain of losing Mother and study hard, saying, "Being upset is useless. Study hard and be successful, and then your mother in Heaven will be proud of you."

I was quite touched with her life story and the gap between us narrowed. Gradually, I began to enjoy staying with Grandmother. I often sat by her side and watched intently as she sewed. Wherever she went, I followed. I began to regard her as the only one in the world who could protect me, and I felt safe and happy when I was near her.

Grandmother must have sensed that my attitude had changed, and became even kinder and talked to me more. While sewing, she told me many stories, such as this one:

Long ago in a remote village, there was a student who loved reading. His father had very high expectations and sent him to the best private school in a nearby city. When the student returned home from school after studying for a year, his father, thinking he must have learned a lot at school, decided to give him a quiz, and said, "What is the plant with a red stalk and white flowers?"

After thinking for a while, the son shook his head and said, "I don't know. I haven't learned about such a plant in books."

The father was enraged, slapped his son, and said, "How stupid you have become! The plant is buckwheat, which you can find everywhere in the fields."

After she finished, I laughed and said, "Even I know the answer to the question asked by the student's father. The student was really stupid. Why did his father send him to school?"

Grandmother smiled and said, "I told you this story because I want you to know the importance of noticing what is around you. It's vitally important to learn from books, but it's also important to learn from real life. Only by putting into practice what you have learned can you truly master knowledge."

Grandmother also told me this story:

A wealthy landlord asked a teacher in his village to teach his little son. He said to the teacher, "I will give you a thousand kilos of rice if you teach my son well."

The teacher was delighted and told the landlord that he was confident his son would learn much from his teaching. After a year, the boy had made remarkable progress and the teacher was very excited at the prospect of getting the promised thousand kilos of rice.

The landlord, the teacher, and the landlord's son went to the room where the rice was stored a week before the New Year. The landlord opened a huge rice container, and was about to give the teacher the rice. With so much rice in front of him, the teacher's joy was beyond description. Then, the landlord wrote a big "1" in the rice with a shoulder pole, turned, and said to his son, "Before I give your teacher the rice, I will first ask you a question to check whether you have learned well. Look at this big mark in the rice. What is it?"

The teacher was confident that his student knew it was 'one' but, to his great surprise and sorrow, after looking at the mark and thinking for a long time, the boy shook his head and said to his father, "I don't know."

The landlord angrily said to his son, "It is 'one'. Have you learned numbers from your teacher?"

"Yes, but I never learned such a big 'one' before," the boy answered.

The landlord then closed the container, and said to the teacher, "Please leave before I order my servants to kick you out."

Grandmother's stories also taught moral lessons. Though she never attended school, she taught me that it was bad to steal, waste food, and be lazy. I also began to realize the importance of being polite to others and working hard.

Grandmother also taught me moral lessons by taking me to local Huagu opera, which has its origins in folk songs and ditties, and reflects the daily life of local people. It has a history of around 200 years and, because of its very strong expressive power, it is much loved and sung by many local people, especially elders. Grandmother was very fond of watching local opera and singing opera songs. Whenever she had time, she would visit the old Yao Family Ancestral Temple, located about two kilometers from our village, with many other villagers to enjoy the opera.

TV was becoming increasingly popular at that time, but Huagu opera was still the dominant entertainment for most villagers. One reason was that TV programs were only available in the evening, while Huagu opera often lasted from morning till evening. Another reason was that TV programs were all broadcast in Modern Standard Chinese, which was hard for most villagers to understand. In contrast, Huagu opera was performed in the local dialect. Huagu opera also tells stories about common people. The themes of the stories are mainly about love, hard work, honesty, filial piety, and so on. The stories are so touching that many in the audience are moved to tears. This is why Huagu opera has remained popular.

The following is a story from a local Huagu opera that is well known by villagers:

A poor scholar named Zhu Maichen lived during the Han Dynasty. He had read many books and was very knowledgeable, yet every time he took the Imperial Examination, he failed. He thus had no other choice than to cut firewood in the hills and sell the wood in town to support his family.

Zhu Maichen lived with his mother and his wife, Cui Zhang. His mother was in her eighties and was weak and sick. Cui Zhang was a beautiful, lazy woman who left all the housework to Zhu Maichen's mother. She did nothing but complain all day. She was dissatisfied with her marriage, and constantly pestered Zhu to write a certificate of divorce and allow her to leave. Zhu Maichen ignored her request.

Zhu Maichen went out to cut wood one very cold day. Cui Zhang was delighted with the weather, hoping that her husband would freeze to death in the heavy snow. She also felt brave without her husband at home and threatened her mother-in-law, "I have suffered enough living with your son. I want to leave him and marry another man."

Zhu Maichen's mother begged, "Don't leave. My poor son will soon be successful. Just wait a bit and soon you'll enjoy a happy life!"

Cui Zhang angrily retorted, "If you don't ask your son to write a certificate of divorce, I'll complain loudly everyday at home and make trouble for you!" and then she shoved her mother-in-law, sending her tumbling to the ground.

Zhu Maichen returned home at that moment, having earned no money that day because of the bad weather. Cui Zhang opened the door and asked Zhu Maichen to give her money. To her disappointment, he said, "Sorry, dear! I earned nothing today. The wind is howling and it's snowing outside. It's impossible to cut wood."

Cui Zhang was even more furious upon realizing that he had no money to give her, and said, "Will you watch me starve to death? I've been your wife for three years, yet you seldom buy clothes and good food for me. I can't bear living with you any longer. Write a certificate of divorce and let me leave or I'll torture your mother when you are not here."

Zhu Maichen loved his mother and didn't want any harm to come to her. He also loved his wife. He then said to Cui Zhang, "Please stay with me a little longer. Trust me! I'm now well prepared for the coming Imperial Examination, and I'm sure I'll be offered a position in government."

"Are you dreaming? You'll never be successful," Cui Zhang said and began to beat Zhu Maichen. At last, he gave in and agreed to write a certificate of divorce.

Cui Zhang soon married a retired governor named Yan Xihuang who already had seven wives, none of whom had borne a son. Yan was pleased to marry Cui Zhang, hoping that she would give birth to a boy.

Cui Zhang led a pampered life of luxury after marrying Yan. She wore silk dresses and precious jewels, and enjoyed delicious food everyday. She did her best to make Yan happy, but she didn't get along with Yan's other wives. She denigrated them for being less beautiful than her, and because they had not given birth to sons. She also mistreated her servants.

Cui Zhang's happy days were, however, short-lived. One afternoon while enjoying herself in the back garden, she carelessly broke a priceless peony-decorated vase that the emperor had presented to Yan. This was a terrible mistake. Yan's other wives immediately told him that Cui Zhang had broken the vase, which enraged Yan so much that he drove Cui Zhang out of his home.

Now, with no one to help her, Cui Zhang became a beggar. Meanwhile, Zhu Maichen passed the Imperial Examination, was appointed to a government position in the capital city, and then returned home to fetch his old mother, who had lost her eyesight from excessive weeping over the loss of her daughter-in-law.

Learning of Zhu Maichen's success, Cui Zhang approached Zhu Maichen and asked him to take pity on her and forgive her. Zhu replied, "If you had been faithful, you would not suffer. You deserve your present plight."

Cui Zhang's heart was broken. Knowing she had nowhere to go, she jumped into a deep river and drowned.

Huagu operas were performed during such festivals as the Lunar New Year. The local township government and wealthy businessmen financed them. Most opera performers were local farmers who enjoyed Huagu opera and who could also earn extra income – about thirty *yuan* a day per performer.

Elders were the main spectators because they had more free time and interest. Children came with their grandparents and enjoyed playing together. Other villagers were generally busy at work and did not attend.

Grandmother often asked my cousins and me to go to the temple to watch Huagu opera with her on weekends. We were happy to go, not because we enjoyed the opera, but to escape the boredom of staying with Grandfather, who was solemn and seldom smiled.

The front seats were invariably occupied when we arrived, so we sat in the back rows. We were usually far from the stage and many people talked loudly to others, which made it challenging to hear the performers. None of this, however, mattered to Grandmother, for she had watched the operas so often that she was familiar with every story and patiently explained what was going on.

We also enjoyed attending operas because Grandmother often bought snacks from hawkers among the crowd, who sold oranges, sugarcane, cookies, and toasted sunflower seeds. My cousins and I were much more interested in the snacks than the performance, and would nag Grandmother to buy snacks for us.

Huagu opera was not performed every day and Grandmother was busy with housework most of the time.

My paternal grandparents were both over sixty but still cultivated rice, corn, and various vegetables, and kept four pigs and a water buffalo. When my uncles and aunts tried to persuade them

to enjoy their life instead of suffering from hard work every day, Grandmother replied, "I know you want us to lead a comfortable life and you will provide us with food and money if we stop working, but your father and I don't want to burden you. Now we can still move, so we don't need your help. Also we don't think we are torturing ourselves. In fact, we enjoy working."

Grandfather did fieldwork and, when the weather was fine, he went into the hills to cut firewood. Meanwhile, Grandmother cleaned, washed, cooked, and sewed. In the afternoon, she gathered pigweed and tended the water buffalo.

My cousins and I would return home to play after school. Grandfather grew increasingly unhappy with this and suggested that Grandmother assign us housework. Grandmother agreed and said to us one evening, "You're no longer small kids and you shouldn't play all the time. From tomorrow, you will help me do housework."

Of course, my cousins and I became unhappy. Grandmother then said, "When I was your age, I did housework at home and tended crops in the fields. You will not work that hard. I'm sure you can do it."

Grandmother said to Cousin Yao Pan and me, "You two take good care of our water buffalo. It is a family treasure. We need it to plow the fields. Don't come home until it has eaten enough grass. I'll beat you if it grows thinner!"

Grandmother told Cousin Yao Gua to do an easier task – clean dishes after meals because he was the youngest.

After we returned home from school in the afternoon during weekdays, Yao Pan and I quickly had a meal, went to the water buffalo shed, and led the water buffalo to pasture using a palm fiber rope linked to a ring in its nose.

Yao Pan and I were initially afraid of the water buffalo, which, instead of a family treasure, seemed to be a huge monster. It was about 1.4 meters tall at the shoulder and very strong. We feared that it might become angry and then attack and kill us. This fear lasted a long while but, as time marched on, we gradually found that the water buffalo was tame and friendly. One afternoon, I summoned enough courage to stroke its head. Instead of being angry and kicking me, it stopped grazing and showed its friendliness

by looking at me intently with its big eyes. We were then no longer afraid of the water buffalo, and looked forward to tending it.

The water buffalo liked swimming. On summer afternoons, it first went down to the ponds to cool off before grazing. It stayed in the water for an hour each time and obviously enjoyed being in the water. It was great fun to watch it dive, so much fun, in fact, that we totally forgot Grandmother's order for us not to swim. We joined the water buffalo in the pond, swam to the water buffalo, rode it, and screamed as it swam fast. I held its two curved horns, which were like a steering wheel. When I turned the horns, it would then swim in that direction.

After cooling itself in water, the water buffalo came up out of the pond and grazed. Yao Pan and I then played on the grass, which was inhabited by many interesting creatures including crickets, grasshoppers, and frogs. We were eager to catch grasshoppers, which we roasted and ate. Yao Pan and I often competed to see who could catch the most grasshoppers.

The water buffalo was intent on grazing and seldom strayed far away, which gave Yao Pan and me time to go into the nearby hills to have more fun. We climbed trees and took baby birds from their nests; searched for red bayberries, chestnuts, and grapes; and gathered the mushrooms that grew everywhere in the hills.

Grandmother didn't scold us when we brought grasshoppers, baby birds, wild fruits, and mushrooms home. She was happy that we no longer complained about tending the water buffalo and encouraged us to gather more mushrooms. We shared the wild fruits with our grandparents and Yao Gua. Grandmother roasted the grasshoppers for us, made a small bamboo cage for the baby birds, and sun-dried the mushrooms and sold them in town.

We had more free time on weekends and were assigned more tasks. When the weather was fine, we would go into the hills to gather fallen pine needles, which were ideal kindling. Grandmother said, "Each of you must bring home a basket of pine needles everyday!" It was easy to do this because there were many pine needles, like an enormous yellow blanket under the pine trees. We used bamboo rakes to collect the pine needles, and then filled our bamboo baskets. It usually took just half an hour to gather pine

needles. We often searched for wild fruit before we returned home and enjoyed listening to birds twittering.

We also weeded the vegetables, gathered pigweed, and washed our own clothes.

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We studied in our free time under Grandmother's strict supervision. She often said, "No matter how much money you have, it can be easily stolen or lost; while no matter how little knowledge you have, it can never be stolen or lost. Knowledge is stored in your mind forever and leads to a happy life!"

We were only allowed to watch TV on weekends, though we wanted to watch everyday. On weekdays after supper, we had to study from eight to nine p.m. sitting at the dining table in the kitchen. While we studied, Grandmother also stayed in the kitchen, cooking food for pigs and cleaning. She also walked near us from time to time to ensure that we concentrated on our studies.

I had little homework to do and finished in about twenty minutes. I then wanted to go out to play, but I couldn't, so I drew pictures. Sometimes I was so bored that I fell asleep and was then awakened by Grandmother. Once I fell asleep and then there was a heavy boom when my head hit the table. Grandmother glared at me, slapped me, and said, "If you are that lazy it must mean your studies are poor. Your mother must be crying in Heaven, knowing how careless you are!"

I cried, not because I resented Grandmother but because I didn't want to disappoint Mother, for I had promised her that I would always study hard. Afterwards, I didn't draw pictures or fall asleep again. Instead, I began studying materials related to my classes, which soon paid off. Though I had to work everyday, I was still the top student in my class. My teachers spoke highly of me when they met Grandmother: "Your grandson is really very promising. Please take good care of him, and he will do even better!"

Grandmother was delighted to know that I excelled in my studies. She hoped that my cousins and I would have a bright future, and fully appreciated that knowledge could pave the way. She encouraged us to study harder one evening by saying, "If one of

you gets the first prize on the final exam, I will take him to visit Heng Mountain next summer vacation."

Heng Mountain is 150 kilometers from our village and is one of the Five Great Mountains in China. Local people believe that Buddha lives on the mountain peak. Every year, countless pilgrims visit the temples on Heng Mountain. Many villagers are Buddhists and burn incense to Buddha at home on the first and the fifteenth day of every lunar month. They also often visit nearby temples and kowtow to Buddha images. They believe pilgrimage to Heng Mountain must be done once a year because it brings good fortune and good health to them and their family.

Grandmother went to Heng Mountain every summer and asked the deities to bless our extended family. When Mother was still alive, Father accompanied Grandmother to Heng Mountain to beseech the deities to help Mother defeat her illness.

Each time Grandmother went to Heng Mountain, she also visited Shao Mountain, the birthplace of Chairman Mao, which is only twenty kilometers from Heng Mountain. Grandmother brought back many pictures of Shao Mountain, told us stories about Chairman Mao, and encouraged us to learn from his example. She also gave us toys, fruits, and snacks that she had bought while on pilgrimage.

My cousins and I looked at the beautiful pictures with great interest and later asked Grandmother to take us to visit Heng and Shao mountains. She always replied, "You're too young to climb such tall, dangerous mountains." Now that Grandmother had held out the possibility of visiting these mountains, we earnestly promised that we would study hard and later we studied during our spare time. Even when tending the water buffalo, we brought books along to read. Our efforts were not in vain and we made remarkable progress in our study – Yao Gua and I both got first prizes on the final exams.

On the day we got the prizes, I excitedly said to Grandmother, "Now we've got first prize. Please keep your promise and take us to visit Heng Mountain!"

Grandmother nodded.

Summer vacation soon arrived and Grandmother made preparations for the pilgrimage. She bought much incense and paper

money for the deities. Yet, just three days before the journey, Grandfather announced at supper, "You two little guys will not go to Heng Mountain this year," shocking both Yao Gua and me. "You're too little to climb such a high mountain, and we are short of money." With that, we did not visit Heng Mountain that year.

Grandmother comforted us, "Please trust me. I will take you to visit Heng Mountain next year." However, Grandmother died in the autumn of 1998 and I was never able to visit Heng Mountain with her.

•••

Grandmother's unexpected death shocked everyone. We had never imagined that she would die so soon. She seemed healthy, seldom had a cold, and rarely visited doctors. She boasted to other elderly women, "See, I'm so healthy. I'll live to see my great-grandchildren."

The day before Grandmother's death was Mid-Autumn Festival. I didn't return to my grandparents' home after school but, instead, I went straight to Father's house to wait for his return. He had come to my grandparents' house the night before and said to me, "I'll bring delicious moon cakes home tomorrow. Please come stay with me tomorrow, and we'll eat moon cakes under the moonlight."

I was eager to stay with Father, as I seldom saw or talked with him after moving to my grandparents' home. I waited and imagined the tasty moon cakes that he would bring. Evening was approaching and my anticipation grew. Yet after about four hours of waiting, my excitement faded and I felt impatient. I walked back and forth in the courtyard and shouted "Father, Father!" desperately hoping he would appear.

It began raining. Enjoying the moonlight was surely impossible. I went into the house angry, hungry, and full of hatred because I felt Father had deceived me. I was alone in the house and, feeling very frightened, I began to cry.

Just then, I heard Grandmother's voice outside and her knock at the door. I opened the door and ran into Grandmother's arms, crying loudly, "I hate Father! He cheated me!"

"Stop crying! You're a big boy. Your father must be on the way back now. And you must be very hungry, so come to my home and have supper," Grandmother said.

We then walked very slowly on the path that was slippery from the rain. I walked in front, holding a flashlight in my right hand. I felt very nervous when we passed the graveyard near Father's house. Suddenly, a loud yowling burst forth. I was petrified, stepped back, and bumped Grandmother, who lost her balance and fell to the wet ground. She lay in pain, but didn't scold me. "Don't worry! It's only a wild cat," she said and then, with considerable effort, she stood and we started off again.

Later, as Grandmother was watching me eat supper, she put her hands on her stomach. Her face was pale.

"What's wrong with you?" Grandfather asked.

"Nothing serious. Just a stomachache and headache," Grandmother replied.

"I told you not to go out in the dark but you wouldn't listen. You must have been possessed by ghosts from the graveyard, otherwise you wouldn't have become ill so suddenly," Grandfather said.

"Shut up! I'll be fine soon!" Grandmother shouted.

Just then, Father entered, half drunk and holding several moon cakes. "Maomao, look! These moon cakes are for you!" Father said happily.

I refused to talk to him and stopped eating. Grandmother glared at Father.

"Sorry! My friends asked me to drink so I got home late! Look, Son, the moon has come out again. Let's go home and enjoy the moonlight."

I was still mad at him and wanted to stay with Grandmother but, to my surprise, Grandmother said weakly, "Go with your father."

Father took my hand. We walked back to our home, sat in the courtyard, and ate the moon cakes. Father kept talking, but I didn't listen. I just stared at the cold bright moon high in the sky and wished that Heaven would cure Grandmother.

After school the next afternoon, I met a lady when I was on the way back to our village. She said, "You poor boy! Your grandmother died this morning!"

"Are you kidding? Grandmother is as strong as a horse, and she'll live much longer than you!" I said angrily.

The lady laughed and walked away.

I neared the village and was astonished to find a large crowd gathered outside Grandmother's house. I guessed something awful must have happened. I heard wailing when I got nearer and realized what the old lady had said was true. Tears rolled down my cheeks as I rushed madly inside.

The crowd parted as I hurried into Grandmother's bedroom. Father and Grandfather were kneeling by Grandmother. Their eyes were red. Many women were around them and sadly lamenting. Father noticed me and said despondently, "She has fallen into a long sleep and will never look after you again."

I wildly shook Grandmother and screeched, "Why did you leave me so soon? You promised to take me to visit Heng Mountain. Why did you cheat me again?"

The next morning, my uncles and aunts returned from Guangzhou. Sister didn't return because she couldn't afford it, although she gave Aunt Yao Lanfang 400 RMB with instructions that it should be given to Father for Grandmother's funeral.

GRANDMOTHER'S FUNERAL

Paternal Grandmother's funeral was held in Uncle's house the day after her sudden death. Father and my uncles and aunts were terribly sad and felt guilty about Grandmother having sacrificed her life for her children. They resolved to hold a grand funeral for her, hoping that she would feel happy and satisfied in Heaven.

Father stopped working and my cousins and I were taken out of school. All our family members wore white mourning clothes. Many villagers expressed sympathy and offered to help. Women volunteered to cook, wash dishes, and do cleaning while the men offered to dig the grave and buy food in town.

A monk and five spirit mediums officiated and put up many scary pictures of ghosts on the walls of the room where the service was held. They also brought a big drum, gongs, and horns.

The coffin holding Grandmother in an eternal, peaceful sleep lay in the center of the room. The monk and the spirit mediums sang, danced, beat the drum, and blew the horns in front of the shrine from morning until midnight. Father, my uncles, aunts, cousins, and I knelt around the coffin, wailed, and burned incense and paper money. The room was full of noise and smoke.

The funeral lasted seven days and was the longest funeral I had ever witnessed. Mother's funeral, in contrast, was finished in only two days. During the funeral, many of our relatives and Grandmother's friends came to comfort us and mourn with us, bringing colorful wreaths and setting off firecrackers. Seeing them approaching, Uncle and Father would kneel and welcome them. Father's knees must have hurt very badly.

The sixth day of the funeral was the busiest, for many people came to mourn. Grandmother's brother came, bringing a band of local performers. Even teachers in our village primary school came. I dared not look at them and kept my head lowered when they came to burn paper money. I failed to escape, however,

the notice of my arithmetic teacher, Mr. Ma Zhe, who whispered, "Cheer up! Remember to come to school immediately after the funeral!"

The musicians gave a rousing two-hour performance that night. It was the first time in our village to have musicians perform at a funeral and it attracted nearly all the villagers. They performed Huagu opera, sang folk songs, and performed magic skits, which won thunderous applause and cheers. I didn't like the performances at all and thought Grandmother must have been very upset knowing so many people were laughing during her funeral.

On the morning of the seventh day, Grandmother' coffin was slowly carried by eight strong men to the graveyard, which was about 500 meters from Uncle Yao's house. My cousins and I walked at the front of the procession, and threw yellow paper money on the road. The musicians walked behind the coffin and performed along the way. Nearly all the villagers came to enjoy the performance and to see Grandmother off.

As the coffin was lowered into the newly-dug grave, my aunts, cousins, and I wept loudly for a long time before leaving the graveyard.

In the afternoon, we burned a three-meter high and four-meter wide bamboo-paper house containing paper cutouts of money, clothes, and other articles in the open air in front of Uncle's house. As the house burned, Father, my uncles, aunts, cousins, and I ran around it with peach branches in our hands to protect these gifts to my paternal grandmother from being stolen by homeless ghosts. It took a half hour to burn the house to ashes. We were totally exhausted, yet I could see Father's smile, which puzzled me. Father said, "She won't need to worry about housing, clothing, or food in Heaven!"

Father's debt for funeral expenses was 3,000 RMB, which took him four years to pay off.

My aunts and uncles all returned to work in Guangzhou three days after the funeral.

Very surprisingly, a week after Grandmother's funeral, all the twelve chickens Grandmother kept died, perhaps because they had gone to Heaven to accompany her.

Grandfather nearly went insane. Every evening, he visited Grandmother's grave and talked to her for hours.

Grandfather disliked me more after Grandmother's death because he believed I had caused her death. He constantly accused me, saying "If your grandmother had not visited you on Mid-Autumn Festival, she wouldn't have died. You murdered her!"

I felt very guilty and dared not live with Grandfather any longer.

LONELY LIFE

Grandmother's death and Grandfather's hatred forced me to return to Father. As he took my belongings back to our home, he said "Son, you are now safe with me." I then thought he would take care of me. However, I was wrong, for he had little time to spend with me. With so much debt incurred from the funeral, he had to work even harder to make ends meet. Besides doing construction work, he planted more rice, and raised three pigs. By the time I woke up each day, Father had already left. My breakfast was ready in the kitchen and my schoolbag was on the table.

Father went to bed late at night and I knew he was exhausted. I was very sympathetic and wanted to grow up quickly and help him. Father didn't appear to be very sad and sometimes sang while working in rice fields and walking on the road. He firmly believed that he could bring a happy life to our family through hard work, and often repeated, "Son, in no more than five years, I'll pay off all our debts and buy a TV set for you."

I had to stay alone at home most of the time. At first, I was unaccustomed to being alone and was terrified that ghosts or thieves would enter the house and hurt me at night. I often sobbed at night before Father returned home.

I was alone one dark night. It was raining heavily and I turned on the light switch but it didn't work. Thinking it might be an omen of ghosts coming, I began to cry loudly and screamed, "Father! Father! Where are you?"

Then I heard footsteps approaching. I stopped crying, listened intently, and heard, "Maomao, open the door."

It was seventy-year-old Lady Yang, our neighbor. Her children were all working in Guangzhou. She lived with her granddaughter, Yao Tongyu, who was three months younger than me and one of my classmates. I opened the door and found Lady Yang smiling, holding an umbrella in her right hand and a flashlight

in her left hand. "Come stay with us until your father returns," she said. I then went to her home.

Yao Tongyu was very happy to see us arrive, ran to us, and greeted, "Hello, Maomao!"

I didn't respond because I was very ashamed. I envied her for having such a kind grandmother. For the next two months, I spent every evening there. Lady Yang treated me like her own grandson. She gave me food, mended my clothes, and told stories to Yao Tongyu and me. Yao Tongyu and I became good friends, often doing homework together, watching TV, and playing hide and seek.

Gradually, my sadness over losing Grandmother diminished, which pleased Father. However, he didn't approve of me spending so much time at Lady Yang's home and said one evening after bringing me home, "Lady Yang is very busy. You'll trouble her and she'll dislike you if you go to her home every evening. So, my dear son, please stay at home in the evening."

"But I'm afraid of ghosts!" I protested.

"Ghosts only attack those with weak minds. Ghosts will stay away from you if you are brave," Father replied.

I thought that I was brave and later visited Lady Yang and Yao Tongyu less frequently.

Staying at home alone was boring. I finished my homework in half an hour and to kill time, I fed and talked to our pigs. When I took food to them, they ran to me and seemed to be starving. While they were eating, I patted them and said, "Do you think I'm kind and brave? Eat as much as you can and grow up quickly so that we can sell you for a lot of money."

Noticing that I was free in the evening and fond of the pigs, Father said, "Son, since you like pigs, please gather pigweed and chop and cook it after school."

I nodded in agreement and soon felt that my life was less empty. I took a big basket to the fields and gathered wild pigweed every afternoon after school, while other children stayed at home, watching TV and playing games. Many adults working in the fields pitied me, and some helped me gather pigweed. After gathering a full basket, I washed the pigweed in a pond, returned home, chopped it, and cooked it. The whole process took about three

hours a day. When Father returned, he praised and thanked me, which motivated me to do more housework – cooking, washing clothes, and fetching water.

Sister's letters also helped. She wrote more often after Grandmother's death. Every week, I received one or two letters from her. Sunday was my favorite day because the postman came with Sister's letter. I always felt very grateful and invited him to have tea before leaving.

Sister's letters were often written on paper folded into a heart shape to show that she loved me and Father. Here is one letter.

Dear Brother,

How are you and Father these days? The weather at home must be very cold now, so you should wear more clothes and take good care of yourself.

Grandmother's death must have been a heavy blow to you, but we are not gods – we cannot bring the dead back to life. Try to accept the reality and wish Grandmother happiness in Heaven.

How are your studies? Remember to study hard. Knowledge is wealth. All the rich people I meet in Guangzhou are well educated. You told me before that you want to make a lot of money when you grow up, so please work hard at school. You don't need to worry about tuition. Father and I will pay.

If you have any problems at school, turn to your teachers for help. I'm sure they are very willing to help you. You can also tell me your problems.

With heavy debts to pay off, Father must be even busier. Please remind him to take care of himself. Health is far more important than money. You must also learn to live independently. I'm very glad to know that you have learned how to cook and wash clothes. Why haven't you learned other housework?

I'm very well here. The old couple is very kind to me. They treat me just like their granddaughter. We visit parks, the city zoo, museums, and other interesting places on weekends. They teach me how to cook Cantonese food and how to speak Cantonese. When they are free, I also teach them our dialect, which interests them. I really enjoy living with them.

Reply soon!

Best wishes!
Sister Jinmei

I carefully put all her letters in a drawer and, whenever I had time, I read them over and over again.

Father was also keenly interested in the letters and often asked me to read them to him at night. After I finished, Father often commented that Sister was very filial and I should learn from her. Then he ordered me to reply to Sister. He dictated, and I wrote. The sentence I wrote most often was "Daughter, we are now short of money to buy chemical fertilizer. If you really love me, please send money."

Sister's letters comforted and guided me in hard, dark times. I did what she advised.

Father was pleased to see the changes in me and asked me to work in the fields on weekends. I wanted to protest, but thinking that it might make Sister sad, I agreed. Father first told me to weed the vegetable fields, which did not require much special knowledge, and then he asked me to work in our rice fields. It was then that I better realized how difficult cultivating rice is.

Father plowed the fields twice with our water buffalo, and then we transplanted the rice seedlings to the fields. This was time-consuming and required knowledge and care. Father carefully taught me to transplant the seedlings. He said, "You must make sure you put their roots deep in the earth, and the space between the lines of the seedlings must be neither too wide nor too narrow." I found that learning to transplant seedlings well was more difficult than learning arithmetic. It took me nearly a week to reach Father's standard, and then I was proud of myself because of all the boys my age, only I was able to transplant rice seedlings well.

It is tiring to bend over and transplant for a long time in the fields, so I often rested at the edge of the fields, which annoyed Father, who would say, "Time waits for nobody. If we are idle, the seedlings will miss the golden time to grow, and we will have a poor harvest. Get back to work. If you continue transplanting the rice seedlings for another hour, I'll buy candy for you."

Two weeks after we had finished transplanting the rice seedlings, we weeded and fertilized the fields. Then we sprayed the fields with insecticide. The rice ripened about three months later and the busy harvest time began. We used sickles to cut the rice.

Father then brought our heavy threshing machine to the fields. It usually took about half a month to harvest all the rice.

We grew two crops of rice. Two months after the second harvest, Father planted rapeseed on the empty rice fields and asked me to help him again.

If there was no flood or drought, one *mu* of rice field yielded about 500 kilos of grain. Our family owned two *mu* of rice fields and, as Uncle was in Guangzhou, Father cultivated his family's three *mu* of rice fields. We thus had five *mu* of rice fields in total, so we should have harvested a lot of grain, but floods and droughts were common and reduced the yield.

Father kept some rice for our own consumption, gave Grandfather 250 kilos of grain every year, and sold the remainder to businessmen and to villagers who did not grow rice. The price ranged from one to 1.5 *yuan* per kilo. Father used the money to pay our debts; buy chemical fertilizer, insecticide, and seeds; and pay my school fees.

Many adult villagers praised me and asked their children to learn from my example. However, instead of regarding me as a model, some children treated me as an enemy. After Father asked me to work in the fields, I had little time to play with other village children and our relationships deteriorated. The boys often made fun of me, and taunted me with such insults as "Half orphan," and "Fool's son," as Father only had two years of schooling while most of their parents had finished primary school.

Though I felt hurt, I dared not retaliate, which brought more problems. At school, boys stole my books and pens when I went to the bathroom. I dared not report this to the teachers in fear that they would steal more things from me.

After school, I walked back home alone and often heard loud insults behind me such as "The one walking in front of us is a fool." "Pig." I began taking a different way home, but I soon found that my tormentors had noticed. It was very hard for me to avoid them.

During a mid-term arithmetic exam, Yao Cai, who sat behind me, asked me to tell him the answers to the questions while the teacher was out of the classroom. I refused. After the exam, Yao Cai said angrily, "You'll be dead after school!"

Knowing he would bully me, I hurriedly left school and took another way home. Ten minutes later, I heard voices, turned, and saw a group of boys running after me. Some held sticks, and others held stones. Feeling death was imminent, I ran towards the nearest mountain, hoping to hide. I failed to escape. The boys quickly surrounded me. Yao Cai smiled and asked, "Why did you refuse to help me?"

I lowered my head and said nothing. He walked up to me and was about to slap me when a loud shout rang out, "What are you doing?"

I turned and saw a man in his forties approaching us, with a hoe on his shoulder. He walked up and said angrily to Yao Cai and the other boys, "Leave, or I'll think of some new uses for my hoe."

I later learned that he was Father's friend. Thanks to him, I was rescued. He accompanied me home. Before he left, he said, "If your classmates bully you, tell me and I'll teach them a lesson."

10

SISTER'S RETURN

Early one morning two days before Mid-Autumn Festival in the year 2000 Father and I were still in bed when we were awakened by a familiar voice calling, "Father, Brother! I'm back!" I jumped out of bed, opened the front door, and was surprised to see Sister standing there with a large suitcase and two big cloth bags. Her hair was darker and she seemed much taller, plumper, and paler.

"Sister, you are really beautiful. You were an ugly duckling, but now you have become a beautiful swan," I said.

Sister was overjoyed, embraced me, and softly said, "You're now much taller, but thinner."

I then looked at my body and suddenly became conscious of my nakedness. "Sorry, Sister. I was so eager to see you that I forgot to put my clothes on," I said. Indeed, I had missed Sister terribly, having not seen her for three years.

Father had gotten up by this time and was delighted to see Sister. He said, "Daughter, welcome back! Your brother and I have really missed you. Why didn't you tell us you were returning?"

"I was given permission to visit home for Mid-Autumn Festival this year, so I decided to return. I also wanted to surprise you," Sister said.

Father and I helped bring Sister's suitcase and bags into the house. They were very heavy and I realized that Sister must have had a hard time with them on her long journey home.

"What a mess," Sister complained as she entered the kitchen. "How do you survive in such filthy conditions?"

"Sorry, Daughter, but I have little time to clean, and your brother is busy studying. He's graduating from primary school next semester," Father said.

"You'll become ill if you live in dirty rooms," Sister said as she began cleaning the kitchen, despite being tired from the long trip. Of course, Father and I joined her.

After about an hour's cleaning, the kitchen had a newer, much more pleasant feel about it. Father said, "Jinmei, you must be very tired and hungry now. Rest while I cook breakfast for you and your brother," and then he fried rice with eggs, Sister's favorite dish. I set off for school after breakfast. I was so excited by Sister's return that I couldn't concentrate on what the teachers were saying. I could only think about Sister and laughed soundlessly and joyously, startling my deskmate.

I returned home that afternoon and was pleasantly surprised to find a much cleaner, tidier, and brighter home. The change was so great that I momentarily wondered if I had entered the wrong home by mistake. Father's and my filthy clothes had been washed and hung on tree branches by the courtyard, and quilts were neatly folded on the beds. The dust on our furniture and walls had vanished. Sister had obviously been busy all morning cleaning and washing.

"Lunch is on the table. Wash your hands and then come eat," Sister said.

I usually had to cook lunch by myself because Father was busy. Now I had no such trouble. "If only Sister would never return to Guangzhou!" I thought. I hastily washed my hands and began to attack the rice, fried eggs, pork, and eggplant. It was the best meal I had eaten at home in years. The food was so delicious that I devoured it in a flash, which made Sister laugh.

"What do you think of my cooking skills now?" Sister asked.

"Perfect! I bet you'd make a fortune in Guangzhou if you opened a restaurant there," I said.

"Thank you. But people there don't like spicy food; they prefer sweet food. It took me some time to get used to it," Sister said.

"And the sweet food made you plump," I joked.

I helped Sister do more cleaning after lunch. As we chatted, Sister said that although her salary was low – 400 RMB a month –

she was happy taking care of the kind, old couple. Sister also taught me some simple Cantonese, which I found very amusing.

Father returned from work that evening with a sack of oranges and said, "Jinmei, I know you love oranges, so I bought some on the way back."

"Thanks, Father. I learned how to make orange juice in Guangzhou, and I'll make orange juice for us later," Sister said.

After supper, Sister gave Father and me things she had brought home including new and secondhand clothing. "Father, Brother, this clothing is for you. Some were worn once or twice by the old couple's family members, but they are much better than what you are wearing. I know you seldom buy clothing for yourselves. I asked the old couple and they agreed I could bring them back home," Sister said.

"Daughter, we don't mind at all. We really like the clothes. Your brother and I aren't picky about clothing. Thank you. We now won't have to spend money on clothing for some time," Father said.

Sister then gave me a big stack of books and said, "These were given by the old man, who was a professor at Sun Yatsen University. He hopes that you can eventually go there to study."

I helped Sister stack the books as she put them on the table.

"The old man said these books will be of great use to you in your future studies and asked me to give them to you," Sister continued.

"Thank you, Sister. And please thank the old man," I said.

The books included reference books for middle school students, a big Chinese dictionary, an English dictionary, a collection of ancient Chinese poems, and novels, most of which I was unfamiliar with.

Sister later showed me a map of Guangzhou City, which she said was much bigger than our county. She explained that it was easy to get lost in the city without a map. Then she took out a little green bottle containing a mysterious, transparent liquid.

"What's that?" I inquired curiously.

"Perfume. The old couple's youngest daughter gave it to me as a gift when she returned from America. She said it's worth 400 RMB," Sister replied.

"Wow! So expensive! Such a little bottle equals a month of your salary," I said, properly awed.

Sister cooked instant noodles she had bought in Guangzhou for breakfast the next morning. It was my first time to eat instant noodles and I found them delicious. I secretly put Sister's perfume and map into my schoolbag as she busily washed dishes after breakfast. Clad in a new blue sweater and new pants that Sister had given me, I said goodbye, headed to school, and attracted attention from many classmates as soon as I entered the classroom. They said that the sweater I wore looked great, which made me very proud.

While Teacher Ma Zhe was writing equations on the blackboard during arithmetic class, some classmates were chatting, others were chewing gum, and a few were sleeping. To kill boredom, I sprayed perfume on my hair and the unusual odor wafted throughout the classroom. The smell grew in intensity. I didn't expect it to have such a powerful effect. My classmates were overwhelmed by this unexpected scent and began chatting loudly.

Teacher Ma turned around and ordered us to shut up, and then he detected the perfume. He put down the piece of chalk he was using and asked, "Who is responsible for that smell?"

My fellow classmates' eyes all fixed on me, which made me blush. At that moment, I wished for the magical powers to transform myself into a mosquito and buzz away from that embarrassing situation. Teacher Ma approached me and I thought I was finished. He ordered me to stand up and hand over the perfume. He looked at the perfume for several seconds and then said, "I suppose it's for girls, not boys."

Loud laughter burst out in the classroom – even I laughed.

Teacher Ma put down the perfume, told me to remain standing till the end of the class, and returned to write on the blackboard. I felt very grateful that he did not confiscate the expensive perfume.

After class, many girl classmates, including the girl who sat behind me, said that the perfume was so powerful that they had nearly fainted. They asked to see the perfume bottle. I agreed but warned them to be careful with it.

I then went out into the corridor to show the map of Guangzhou to boy classmates. It was their first time seeing a city

map and they were very interested. I told them Guangzhou was a big, beautiful city, and a map was a must for travelers in Guangzhou. As I was introducing Guangzhou to the boys enthusiastically, Teacher Ma walked up. My friends all ran into the classroom, leaving me stranded. "It's you – the troublemaker. Don't you know it's dangerous when many students stand near the rail?" Teacher Ma scolded.

I kept my head down, the map in my hand.

"What's that?" Teacher Ma asked, spying the map. I handed him the map. Teacher Ma was very interested and asked authoritatively, "Do you know how to read a map?"

"I... I don't know," I replied.

"Let me explain how to read a map," Teacher Ma said. "First you should know the directions: right is east, left is west, top is north, and bottom is south. Finding the city center is very important." As we continued chatting about the map, I gradually realized Teacher Ma was a nice man.

The next day was Mid-Autumn Festival – a time for family reunions. Adult children visited their parents with moon cakes bought in the central township town market and from peddlers who frequented our village. I didn't like Mid-Autumn Festival, partly because Grandmother had died the day after Mid-Autumn Festival and also because Father could not afford moon cakes. I felt even worse when some village boys told me that they hated moon cakes because their family had too many.

This year's Mid-Autumn Festival was different because our head teacher informed us that we didn't need to attend school, and Sister had planned several activities. In the morning, Father, Sister, and I went to the town's best photo shop to have our photo taken. This was the first time for me to be photographed in such a shop, so I was excited. Father wore the suit Sister had bought for him, and I wore my new blue sweater. Father stood in the middle, and Sister and I stood on either side of him.

That afternoon, Sister and I walked to our maternal grandparents' home. Grandmother was so pleased and moved to see Sister that she embraced her tightly and wept. Sister was her only granddaughter and had lived with her for almost four years. Sister left her to help Mother care for me after I was born.

"Grandmother, I'm so sorry that I haven't visited you for a long time," Sister sobbed.

"Don't apologize! Your grandfather and I have always felt guilty for being unable to help you continue your schooling," Grandmother said.

The scene was so moving that I wanted to shed tears but I didn't, because it would have been a sign of weakness. Sister stopped crying and gave Grandmother a pair of leather shoes and Grandfather a carton of cigarettes. Before leaving, Sister promised to visit more frequently.

We sat in the courtyard that evening enjoying the round bright moon, while munching moon cakes that Sister had brought from Guangzhou. The cakes were soft and sweet, with an egg yolk in the center of each one. "Sister, this moon cake is so yummy. I love the yolk," I mumbled, my mouth full.

"Yes, and these moon cakes are very different from those sold in the town market, which are hard and sour, often with bits of orange rinds and peanuts," Father added.

"These moon cakes must be expensive," I said.

"You're right. One box of moon cakes cost me eighty RMB," Sister said.

Father frowned and said, "Eighty RMB! You can buy a full basket of moon cakes in town for that."

After finishing the moon cakes, Sister taught me a beautiful song 'The Moon Is My Heart':

Don't ask me how deeply I love you,
Don't ask me how much I like you,
My heart is pure, and my feeling is real,
The moon represents my heart and love for you.

Sister only had a week of holiday and had to return four days after Mid-Autumn Festival. She put sweet potatoes, radishes, chili peppers, and peanuts in a bag the night before her departure and said the old couple would love these local products.

"Sister, good morning!" I greeted when I entered the kitchen for breakfast the next morning, but Father and Sister had already gone to the township bus station before I woke up. My breakfast

and my school bag were on the table, and I was alone again. Only then did I realize Sister had left me again. Tears trickled down my face.

RIDING A BIKE

One late-autumn Saturday morning, Father and I went to the township town market to sell the newly harvested late-season rice. Father had previously sold rice to older villagers who had stopped growing rice and whose children worked in southern cities. He sold the rice for comparatively low prices because he believed in the old Chinese adage, "The clever hare does not eat grass from the entrance of its warren," and because older villagers were expert at bargaining. My paternal grandfather, who had grown rice for most of his life, said to Father one day, "Fool! Sell your rice at the township town market and I'm sure you'll earn 1,000 RMB more this year."

This was an exciting sum for Father because it meant he could pay off his debt to Uncle and our other relatives. For years, Father had worked hard every day because of that debt and, though he was only in his early forties, he looked like he was in his sixties.

"Maomao, from this year on, we'll begin to enjoy a debt-free life," Father said. "I've had enough of it! But we first must sell our surplus rice in the township market."

Father got up early every morning for several weeks in a row. He put rice in two big sacks, and then carried the rice using a bamboo pole for a distance of about seven kilometers to the township town market along a meandering, quiet dirt road that few vehicles traversed. Occasionally, a tractor sputtered by, hauling construction materials such as bricks, sand, and cement.

I was amazed at Father's effort in selling rice. "Father, you are as strong as a superman!" I said. Don't your shoulders ache?"

"A little," Father replied, "but it's nothing compared to what I did in the early 1980s. To build this house, your grandfather ordered me and your uncle to buy and carry tree trunks from the county town, which is about forty kilometers from our village. It was really a terrible experience. My shoulders bled and my legs ached."

"Why didn't you just cut down some of the many trees in the nearby mountains?" I asked.

"The village leader wouldn't permit it. Anyone found cutting trees in the mountains was severely punished," Father said.

Though Father sold rice everyday, there was still much rice unsold after a month because he could only carry two sacks of rice to the township at a time. I suggested hiring a tractor, but Father was unwilling to pay. Then I suggested, "Father, why not use our water buffalo to pull a two-wheel cart loaded with rice?"

"Clever boy!" Father exclaimed. The next day, he brought a cart home, but he didn't use the water buffalo to pull the cart because he did not want the water buffalo to suffer. Instead, he pulled the cart and could now transport six sacks of rice per trip.

Father asked for my help on the weekend. I pushed the cart from behind while Father pulled in front. The slopes on the road were challenging. Father usually had to stop before the slopes, unload the rice, pull the cart up the slope, and then carry the rice up the slope, one bag at a time. On the way down slopes, I climbed up on the cart, sat on the sacks, and enjoyed the cool wind against my sweaty face.

The township rice market was located in the town center and bustled with activity. There were few sellers, because most farmers only grew enough rice to feed their families. Father charged 140 RMB per 100 kilos, a price slightly higher than that in the village. After nearly five weeks' of hard work, Father finally sold all our surplus rice and, though exhausted, he was satisfied.

"What shall I buy for you, Son?" he asked when we were about to return home after our final rice-selling trip.

"A new bicycle!" I replied immediately, tried of walking to and from the township town. The thought of riding a bike filled me with excitement.

Father and I walked to a bicycle shop where I was immediately attracted by a red bike.

"How much is the red one?" Father asked the proprietor.

"One hundred and fifty RMB," said the owner.

"No kidding? My brother bought a bike for just twenty RMB in 1984," Father said, shocked by the price.

"Sir, times have changed. It is now the year 2000," said the owner. "If you really want it, I can sell it for 120."

Father paid and I happily pushed it out of the shop and all the way home because neither Father nor I could ride a bike. Upon our arrival, Grandfather scolded, "What a waste of money! What's the use of a bicycle? Walking is good for the health. I'm sure you'll spoil Maomao!"

"What an old fogey!" I grumbled silently.

I then began learning how to ride the bicycle. Though Father was busy, he made time in the evening to help me. We pushed the bicycle to the village square where, at that time, villagers dried rice, corn, rapeseed, and soybeans. Villagers increasingly owned flat-roofed houses and used their roofs for drying. When the square was abandoned by adults, it was a paradise for village children. In the evening before dark, the square was full of the sound of children singing, dancing, skipping rope, and chasing each other.

I could not balance myself on the bicycle in the beginning. Father helped by walking behind the bicycle, clutching the back of the seat, and saying, "Don't worry about falling, just pedal!"

I tried, but my legs were too short to reach both pedals at the same time. Father then lowered the saddle with a pair of red-handled pliers. Kids playing on the square came to watch and laughed at my ineptitude. After three evenings of practice, I was able to pedal, but couldn't control the handlebars. "You're stupid," Father said discouragingly.

"Yeah, and I inherited that trait from you!" I replied.

When I was about to go to the square the next evening, Yao Cai and Yao Beibei stopped me. Both were skilled bike riders, having learned on their old, broken bikes.

"A beautiful bicycle, isn't it?" asked Yao Cai, who could ride a bike while holding both hands high in the air.

"Can you ride it now?" Yao Beibei asked, tapping me on the shoulder.

I shook my head, and said I hoped that they might teach me. "All right," said Yao Cai, "we will teach you to ride the bicycle, and we promise that you will be able to ride it skillfully in less than a week."

"But, you must promise to allow us to ride your bicycle in the future," added Yao Beibei.

"No problem, as long as you ride it carefully and don't damage it," I said, and then suggested that they go to the square with me, but they thought that was a bad idea.

"You'll never be able to ride if you practice at the square," Yao Cai said.

"Yeah," Yao Beibei agreed. "Do you know how we learned to ride? On the slopes. When practicing riding a bike down a slope, you don't need to pedal, so it's much easier for you to learn to balance."

We then went to a gentle slope. Yao Cai and Yao Beibei rode the bicycle up and down the slope several times, demonstrating how to ride, and then asked me to ride as they did.

After less than an hour's practice, I could balance the bicycle and pedal at the same time. Good teachers are truly important!

SUMMER HOLIDAY

Another summer holiday began - a time of freedom and travel for most village children. When the semester ended, parents working in big southern cities returned and took their children back to the city with them. Consequently, few children remained in the village.

I envied my cousins, Yao Pan and Yao Gua. I had never been out of our county, while they had stayed with their parents in Guangzhou every summer holiday since 1997.

Uncle returned home to fetch my cousins again during the summer holiday of 1999. Before leaving, Uncle said, "Maomao, I'll buy new clothes for you in Guangzhou," which made me feel even worse.

Summer holiday mostly meant hard work and never-ending loneliness. Father needed my help and there were no children to play with. My daily holiday was a routine of preparing three meals, weeding rice paddies and vegetable fields, herding the water buffalo, washing Father's and my clothing, and pumping water to rice fields. Father didn't ask me to fetch water or firewood, though he really needed help. He believed that children's growth was stunted if they carried too much on their shoulders. Father is only 1.58 meters tall and wanted me to be taller when I matured. He did far more work than I. He often said our family would be rich if I worked hard, so I complained very little in the beginning.

Cooking had become much easier for me. Every day we ate rice and vegetables such as cowpeas, pumpkin, and bitter melon. We were not vegetarians, but father couldn't afford meat. There was only one stove in the kitchen, so I first boiled rice and then cooked a vegetable dish. While cooking, I periodically added firewood to the stove. Occasionally, I went out to the courtyard to cool off because the heat from the fire quickly made the kitchen unbearable. Father was now satisfied with what I cooked and even

said once, "Son, you now cook as well as your sister." I wondered if that were true and my desire to see Sister intensified.

I often weeded the rice paddies after breakfast. The early season rice, which was planted in March and harvested about 110 days later, was ripening and required much attention. Father was busy applying fertilizer and spraying pesticides on the rice fields, which was both time- and energy-consuming. I was supposed to pull out the barnyard millet that resembled rice plants. I hated weeding. My clothes quickly became filthy, the rice leaves pricked my skin, and leeches sucked blood from my legs. Still, there was some fun to be found working in the rice paddies. Big water birds lived in the paddies and built nests there. These birds were brown or black and had long legs. Sometimes I spotted nests where eggs half as big as chicken eggs had been laid. I collected the eggs and made a big meal of them, ignoring the warning of elders who said, "If you eat water bird eggs, you'll get freckles on your face." I doubted this, continued to eat the eggs, and never got freckles on my face.

When I wasn't weeding the rice paddies, Father asked me to weed the plots where we grew chili peppers, cowpeas, pumpkins, tomatoes, cucumbers, wax gourds, eggplants, sweet potatoes, peanuts, and corn, which was also very time consuming. Weeds grew rampantly during the hot, humid summer days. I pulled the weeds, roots and all, out of the soil; otherwise the weeds would not die. I piled the pulled weeds in the corner of the field. In the evening, Father picked up the weeds, washed them, and fed them to the water buffalo. I liked weeding the vegetables fields more than the rice paddies because there were neither leeches nor sharp leaves that cut me. I could also snack on fresh cowpeas and cucumbers while weeding.

I occasionally washed clothing in village wells. The deepest one provided drinking water and was about three meters deep, while the other three were about 1.5 meters deep and used for washing clothing, vegetables, weeds, meat, and other daily necessities. At that time, the wells were the most crowded and most frequently visited place in our village. While washing, villagers chatted, laughed, and sometimes argued. The wells were the village information center.

Villagers were in general agreement that Father's clothing was the filthiest in the village and my visits to the wells upset villagers doing their laundry there, especially the women. About a minute after I put Father's clothing in a well, the clear water turned muddy, angering women who were also washing.

"You should tell your father to change clothes more often!"

"You should wash your family's clothing at night when no one else is washing here."

"You should..."

Though I agreed with them, I never took their suggestions to heart and seldom joined the conversations. I just concentrated on rubbing the clothes on stones and beating them with a round stick. After washing, I hung the clothing on plum tree branches in front of the courtyard of our house.

After lunch, it was time for me to herd the water buffalo, our most valuable animal and helper. I often led it to graze in paddies that, because their owners worked outside the village, were no longer being cultivated. This tendency to leave the county for work accelerated over time. Paddy grass was lush and fresh, satisfying our water buffalo in less than two hours. I caught gadflies that lit on the water buffalo and caught grasshoppers in the grass. Beautiful chrysanthemums resembling little shining stars also grew in the grass. Towards evening, I would often pick a bunch of these chrysanthemums before going home and then decorate my bedroom with them.

Pumping water to our rice paddies was the most interesting thing Father asked me to do in summer. Rice requires a lot of water and not all the village paddies are easily irrigated. Some paddies are above nearby ponds and ditches. Also, during the heat of summer, though it sometimes rains a great deal, the water quickly evaporates and the paddies become dry. Electric and diesel pumps are used to rehydrate the fields, creating a summer symphony of constant engine humming.

Father paid five RMB an hour for others to pump water into our rice paddies because we couldn't afford a pump. This cost several hundred RMB each summer, which eventually led Father to buy an electric pump with money that Sister sent him.

The day he brought the new pump home Father said confidently, "Maomao, we'll save much money and trouble with our new pump!"

"Yes, and we can earn extra money by pumping water for others," I said. But problems soon arose because neither Father nor I knew how to operate the pump.

Father turned and said, "Son, you can read. Look at the instruction brochure and figure out how to operate the pump."

I read the first several pages but it was far too technical for me to understand. I put down the brochure and said, "I don't understand it."

Father then paid Yao Wenge, a villager expert in pumps and electricity, to teach us what we needed to know. Father said, "Learn carefully from Mr. Yao or we'll have wasted our money on this expensive pump!"

Yao Wenge first got the electric lines and pipes ready, and then put the pump in a big basket to protect it from such garbage as tree leaves, plastics bags, and empty bottles. He put the basket in the water and turned on the pump. Finally, water was pumped up to the rice paddies. After showing us how to run the pump, Yao Wenge asked me to practice pumping water. Under his guidance, I learned what to do. Father was very grateful and invited Yao Wenge to have supper with us.

Though we now knew how to operate the pump, many minor problems plagued us. For example, the electric lines often broke, so we were without power. I got electric shocks several times and we had to compete with other villagers for water because many people were pumping from a relatively limited supply. To avoid conflict, Father pumped water early in the morning and late at night when few other villagers were pumping.

When the electric pump was on, I was often asked to stay near it to ensure it was working normally and to protect it from being stolen or damaged. This also allowed Father to do other things. Father brought me food and I ate near the paddies when I was watching the pump for hours.

During this time, I often caught small fish in ditches, read under trees, and slept on the grass. Ants, flies, and stinkbugs tormented me when I tried to sleep. I particularly disliked the

stinkbugs. I crushed them between my fingers and then observed their bodies being carried away by groups of ants.

Father often accompanied me at night when we used the pump because I was afraid of ghosts and believed that they might appear at night. We caught fireflies, enjoyed the loud croaking of frogs, and gazed at the glimmering stars. I was very excited to see shooting stars streak across the sky. Father said that a shooting star suggested that a person, somewhere, had died. When I was sleepy, I slept on the grass, but was then bitterly tormented by mosquitoes. When I woke up, I was often in a bad temper, crying and begging Father to stop pumping and let us return home.

BLACK Y'S RAMPAGE

I named our water buffalo Blacky because her skin and horns were black. Blacky began behaving abnormally. While in the grass field, instead of grazing, she often ran wild; when she was tired, she lay on the ground and panted with white foam coming from her mouth.

"She must be in heat," said an old villager who was also herding his water buffalo. "You should take her to a male water buffalo." This was a good suggestion except there were no male water buffalo in our village. Farmers preferred females because they were gentle most of the time and gave birth to babies that could be sold at high prices. A one-year-old water buffalo was worth about 3,000 RMB in 2011.

"Thank you, but I think Blacky will be fine soon," I said. Hardly had I finished when, "Bang!" Blacky jumped into the rice paddy nearby, splashing me with mud and water, and destroying a big patch of rice plants, infuriating the paddy's owner, who was weeding in the paddy.

"Idiot! Compensate me!" the owner bellowed. Without answering, I removed my cloth shoes and jumped into the paddy, hoping to catch Blacky and stop her from causing more damage.

"Blacky, stop!" I shouted, but she refused to listen. She ran as fast as a wild horse across several rice paddies, leaving a swath of destruction in her wake. In less than five minutes, Blacky had vanished into the west. My voice hoarse and my body exhausted, I stopped running. I thought Father would beat me to death if he learned I had lost Blacky, our family's most valuable asset. Father depended on Blacky to plow our rice paddies and now I had to tell him about her escape, hoping he could find her.

I ran to a nearby rice field where Father was busy spraying pesticide. "Why are you here? Why is there so much mud on your clothes? Did you fight with boys again?" Father asked.

"No, I didn't fight. Blacky went wild and ran to the west," I stammered and started sobbing in fear Father would beat me.

"Useless boy!" Father said, stepping out of the paddy and putting down the sprayer. "Take the sprayer home and I'll go look for Blacky," and then he trotted off toward the west.

It was dark when Father returned home. "Did you find Blacky," I asked eagerly.

He shook his head disappointedly and said, "I asked people I met about Blacky. They all said they had seen her and I went in the direction they indicated, but it was soon too dark for me to see anything. Let's wait until tomorrow morning."

Father was still worried. While having supper, he said, "Perhaps bad people will capture Blacky, slaughter her, and sell her meat."

"What can we do now?" I asked, putting down my rice bowl.

"Let's go ask your grandfather for help. He'll ask your grandmother in Heaven to bless Blacky," Father replied. After supper, we visited Grandfather, who was already in bed. He was annoyed by our sudden visit.

"What the Hell do you want?" he fumed.

When Father finished reporting what happened to Blacky, Grandfather was even angrier because he had bought Blacky two years ago, although Father cared for her. "How can you plow the rice field without Blacky?" Grandfather stormed, then started scolding me as I expected.

"Father, complaining won't help now," Father said to Grandfather. "Please ask Mother to bless Blacky."

Grandfather then killed and cooked a rooster, brought it to the shrine, offered three cups of liquor, and burned some paper money. Father and I knelt before the shrine and put our hands together. As Grandfather burned the paper money, he prayed, "Dear wife, now your son is in trouble. He has lost Blacky, our water buffalo. Please protect Blacky from harm and help your son find her soon."

To learn if Grandmother would really help Father, Grandfather used two small horn-like pieces of bamboo. One piece has two sides – one side is yin and the other is yang. They are used

for divining in our village. Grandfather dropped them onto the floor and both pieces showed the yang side up, which was not a favorable portent. Grandfather then burned more paper money and prayed, "Dear wife, don't be angry. I promise your son will bring you more food, liquor, and money when he finds Blacky."

Grandfather then threw the bamboo horns again. This time one piece was yin side up and the other was yang side up, which suggested that Grandmother would help. Both Grandfather and Father smiled. "Blacky will be fine," Grandfather said, patted Father's shoulder, and told us to stand up.

Father got up and went looking for Blacky at dawn the next morning. He must have walked a very long way because it was dark when he returned home. He was tired and in a foul temper because he had not found Blacky. He tied me to the pine tree in front of our house and started to beat me with a bamboo stick. I cried and screamed as the stick struck my buttocks. The neighbors were attracted to the noise. Several of them urged Father to stop, while others saw it as good chance to educate their own children on how to behave properly. Among the audience were the two water buffalo dealers – Yao Zhougai and Yao Daoguang – from whom Father had bought Blacky. "Please stop punishing your son. We know where Blacky is," Yao Zhougai said.

Curious, Father stopped beating me and invited them into our house, wishing to know more. "This morning, we went to the county town to sell water buffalo. A farmer stopped us on our way back and said he had a water buffalo to sell. We then went to his home to see it. I immediately recognized it was your Blacky," Yao Daoguang said, sipping from the cup of water in his hand. "We then lied to the farmer that we didn't have enough money with us but promised we would return tomorrow."

Yao Zhougai nodded and said, "After leaving the farmer's house, we talked to several local villagers who told us the farmer didn't usually keep water buffalo and that the one that he wanted to sell was captured yesterday in his rice paddy, which made us even more certain it was Blacky."

"Can you take me to that farmer's home tomorrow?" Father asked.

"Of course we can, but you must pay us," Yao Zhougai answered.

"No problem," Father agreed. "I'll pay you each one hundred RMB and also give the farmer a hundred RMB if I can get Blacky back."

Both dealers stayed at our house that night. The next morning, all three started off at around six a.m.

Father returned with Blacky in the afternoon and many villagers came to congratulate us. Blacky was no longer wild – many wounds on her body testified to how the farmer had beaten her.

"Maomao, we must thank your grandmother in Heaven. Without her help, Blacky might never have been found," Father said to me happily, though he was tired from walking.

"Yes, Father," I said, pretending to agree. I approached Blacky, who I now hated so intensely for escaping under my watch. I had sworn I would beat her if she returned. If she had not escaped, I would not have suffered from Father's beating. But the moment I touched her face, she raised her head and licked my hand, and my hatred melted into compassion.

As we ate supper, Father explained how he got Blacky back: "The farmer's home is in a small village about twenty kilometers from our village. It took us two hours to get there. The farmer was at first unhappy when Yao Zhougai introduced me as Blacky's owner."

"Then what happened?" I asked.

"Yao Daoguang threatened to call the police. The farmer then gave in but, before turning Blacky over to me, he asked me to describe Blacky, worried I was not her real owner," Father replied.

"So how did you answer the farmer?" I said.

"I'm very familiar with Blacky, so it wasn't a hard question. I said Blacky was female, around 1.4 meters tall, and a pesticide bottle lid was tied to her nose. The farmer then went to the pen to check if my description was correct. He returned with a big smile and allowed me to take Blacky," Father said.

We visited Grandfather after supper, who attributed Blacky's return to Grandmother's blessing. "You must be more careful with Blacky when herding in the future," Grandfather said.

I nodded. But just two days later, Father sold Blacky to Yao Zhougai. When people came to our home to take her, I locked the door and wouldn't allow them in. I had herded Blacky for two years. She had afforded me much joy by allowing me to ride her.

"Son, open the door!" Father demanded.

"No!" I insisted. "Why do you want to sell her?"

"Son, I know you are very fond of Blacky, but she's still in heat. We cannot find a male water buffalo for her, so selling her is the best way to prevent her from making more trouble," Father said. "I promise you I'll get another lovely water buffalo for you soon."

MOUNTAIN CLIMBING

In the spring of 2001, I was about to graduate from the village primary school. Schooling had become less pleasurable because we were forced to study for longer periods of time. Teachers wanted us to perform well on the upcoming junior middle school entrance examination, hoping that they would then receive rewards from the township education bureau. The only way the teachers could think of improving our exam scores was for us to spend more time in school. Consequently, we had to attend school six days a week from eight a.m. to four p.m., which seemed excessive for young kids like me. Only Chinese and arithmetic would be examined so such other subjects as music, PE, and drawing were given little attention.

The teachers became stricter. Mr. Yao Jiawei, the schoolmaster, became our head teacher and taught us Chinese. He was well known for his various punishment techniques. Mr. Wu Long, who rarely smiled, began teaching arithmetic. "Don't complain, kids. You must spend more time on your studies now, or no middle school will accept you," Mr. Yao said the first day he taught us. "Also, don't forget to pay for the extra day schooling – that's one hundred *yuan* per student."

Most parents were very supportive and came to school to pay the fee that Mr. Yao demanded. A week later, all the students had paid the fee except for Yao Cai and me. Our parents were not cooperative. Instead, they were angry with Mr. Yao.

"Impossible! He has already robbed you of your Saturdays, the time you should help me with farm work. Now he is trying to steal money. Tell him I'm too poor to pay," Father said when I asked for money.

Yao Cai's family was not poor. His grandfather served in the township government, and his father sold herbal medicine. As the only child in his family, Yao Cai got most everything he wanted but this time, both his grandfather and his father said no. "Your

teacher has no right to force you to attend classes six days a week. It's illegal," Yao Cai's grandfather said.

"Yes, and now you are in the nine-year compulsory education program, which means every pupil can go to junior middle school no matter how badly he performs on the graduation exam. Your teacher is just making money off of you," added Yao Cai's father.

Parents who had paid the money asked Mr. Yao to pay more attention to their kids and be strict with them but ironically, Yao Cai and I became Mr. Yao's focus. Every morning, he asked us if we had brought the money. During class a few days later, Mr. Yao told us to go back home to get money. Instead of going home, we played outside for about an hour, and then returned to class. "My father isn't at home," I said.

"My father said he would come to school next week to pay," Yao Cai said.

This became a daily ritual until Mr. Yao tired of our tricks and gave up demanding money, but he did not give up tormenting us and seized every chance to punish us. Once when I hadn't finished my homework, he ordered me to stand at the back of the classroom for two hours. Mr. Yao caught Yao Cai eating sunflower seeds during class one afternoon, pulled him out of his seat, slapped his face, and kicked his knees. Yao Cai lost his balance and fell to the floor. His head thudded against the concrete, horrifying us all. Yao Cai wailed loudly, stood up, and rushed out of the classroom.

Around half an hour later, we heard loud cursing outside the classroom. Yao Cai's father approached. He was a robust, strong, former soldier. He kicked the classroom door open, went directly to Mr. Yao, ignored the fact that he was teaching, and shouted, "Why did you beat my boy so badly?" Then he punched Mr. Yao in the face, breaking his glasses. Mr. Yao fell and his nose started bleeding. The loud noise soon attracted other teachers and students. Some girls were so shocked that they cried. Most boys cheered and clapped.

"Don't hit my son again, or you'll suffer even more!" Yao Cai's father thundered, flinging a textbook at Mr. Yao's head, and storming out of the classroom.

Police visited our village and arrested Yao Cai's father that evening. Nearly all the villagers went to watch and say goodbye to him.

Yao Cai's father was detained in the local jail for a week, ordered to pay the cost of treating Mr. Yao's injuries, and forced to write an apology letter, which was soon widely discussed in the village because copies were stuck everywhere in the village and were sent to every household. The letter read:

TO TEACHER YAO JIAWEI AND FELLOW VILLAGERS:

I AM YAO JIAJIA, YAO CAI'S FATHER. ON THE AFTERNOON OF THE EIGHTH OF MARCH, I BEAT TEACHER YAO JIAWEI, MY SON'S HEAD TEACHER. I SINCERELY APOLOGIZE FOR MY STUPID ACT ON THAT DAY. I AM VERY WILLING TO PAY ALL OF TEACHER YAO'S MEDICAL EXPENSES. I AM SORRY FOR THE BAD INFLUENCE THAT MY ACTIONS HAVE HAD. I AM THE FIRST PERSON TO HAVE EVER BEATEN A TEACHER IN OUR VILLAGE, AND I HOPE I AM THE LAST ONE. WE SHOULD RESPECT TEACHERS!

YAO JIAJIA

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Though we spent much time at school, the results of our studies were very discouraging. On the midterm examination, only six of forty students scored higher than sixty percent in Chinese, and just eleven students scored more than sixty percent in arithmetic. Perhaps Mr. Yao had given up hoping for a reward, or maybe he realized that his efforts were not producing the desired results. He changed a lot after the fight and the midterm examination, becoming less strict. We delighted in this new freedom.

Mr. Yao announced one Friday afternoon before we went home, "No classes tomorrow. Spring has come, so let's go out to enjoy nature's beauty tomorrow. How about climbing Mount Baye and having a picnic?"

"Great!" we all chorused.

"But the condition is that you must promise to study harder," Mr. Yao added.

"No problem!" we replied with little thought.

I had never had a picnic or climbed Mount Baye before, so I was very enthusiastic. When I got home and told Father, he said, "Great! But did Mr. Yao ask for money for tomorrow's activity?"

"No. We just need to prepare food," I replied. "What should I take?"

"There are some onions and eggs in the kitchen, so perhaps you can make onion and egg soup for your classmates," Father said.

I was the first to reach the classroom the next morning. Other students soon arrived with rice, salt, and pork. One boy who lived just behind the school even brought an iron rice pot and a wok.

Mr. Yao and Mr. Wu entered the classroom at around eight a.m. After ensuring all the students were present, Mr. Yao announced, "Let's start off."

The foot of Mount Baye is just 200 meters from the primary school. It is the highest and most beautiful mountain in our village. It's shaped like a banana tree leaf, which explains why it is called Mount Baye because *baye* is 'banana tree leaf' in our local dialect. Most of the time, the peak of Mount Baye is shrouded in mist and, as such, serves as a weather forecaster. When black clouds cover the peak, heavy rain will soon fall.

We reached the foot of Mount Baye after walking for a few minutes, and hid what we had brought among ferns, which are the most common plants on the mountain. Mr. Yao then told us to walk in two lines – boys in one line and girls in the other. Mr. Yao walked in front and Mr. Wu walked behind to protect us.

A wide, gently sloping path made climbing easy in the beginning. We were amazed by the bright beauty of red camellias, which we picked and smelled. Some girls decorated their hair with them. Birds sang and fluttered, which inspired us to sing. However, as we climbed higher, the path became narrow and the slope became progressively steeper. Climbing was no longer fun. Most students started panting and every single step seemed a challenge.

Soon, some students started complaining that they wanted to give up climbing. Though there were still many flowers along

the path and the birds continued warbling, no one was in the mood to enjoy any of it. Mr. Yao then commanded us to move forward hand in hand so that no one would be left behind and encouraged us by saying that we would soon reach the summit.

After nearly two more hours of hard climbing, we reached the top at around noon. The sun shone, chasing mist and clouds away. A vast panorama of the valley lay sprawled before us. The majesty of the vista immediately dispelled our exhaustion. We cheered and clapped exuberantly.

"Listen!" Mr. Yao shouted. He waited until we were all quiet, and then said, "Is the scenery amazing?"

"Yes!" we shouted in unison.

"Dear students, your painful hike is not in vain. No pain, no gain. It's the same with study. If you study really hard, you will gain high marks on the upcoming examination. Do you see those high buildings over there in the county town? There are parks, theatres, libraries, supermarkets, and big schools there where people are wealthy and lead a comfortable, happy life. Don't you want to lead a better life?"

We all nodded dutifully.

"Then study hard, because it's the only way for you to escape poverty," Mr. Yao said passionately.

Though Mr. Yao wanted us to stay on the mountaintop to enjoy the scenery longer, we said we were tired and famished.

"You're too young to appreciate the true meaning of mountain climbing," Mr. Yao said and then agreed to our request to descend the mountain. We gathered dry tree branches and pine needles as we walked down, to later use to fuel our cooking fire. Upon returning to the foot of Baye Mountain, we enthusiastically started preparing our picnic. Girls went to a nearby stream and washed rice, pork, and vegetables while boys gathered more firewood and made two simple stoves from stones and mud. We used one stove to cook meat and vegetables and the other to cook rice.

We boys had finished making the stoves by the time the girls returned from the stream. Several girls volunteered to cook. The most skillful cook was a short, plump girl who lived with her granny and had cooked from the age of six. I watched intently as

she made soup using the eggs and onions I had brought. When the water was boiling, she added stirred eggs and chopped onions. Her adept, confident movements reminded me of my dear sister, who had once cooked for me. I knew her future husband would be a lucky man.

We began to eat after all the dishes were ready but, to our dismay, we found the rice was undercooked. Mr. Yao explained this was because of low atmospheric pressure in the mountains and told us not to eat the rice. We soon devoured all the dishes. Despite the undercooked rice, we had a wonderful time that day. We were very grateful to Mr. Yao and stopped thinking of him as an 'enemy'. In fact, we began to respect him and tried our best to study, hoping not to disappoint him with our final examination results.

BULLIED

Yao Zhiqiang and Yao Zhiwei are brothers, and were my playmates and next-door neighbors when I was a child. Yao Zhiqiang is three years older than Yao Zhiwei, and Yao Zhiwei is one year older than me. I looked up to them as heroes and protectors for years. Both were brave and able, and taught me how to climb trees, swim, make and use catapults, and even to catch snakes. I was so afraid of snakes that I soon gave it up.

Their father was a farmer who also hunted and sold wild pigs, snakes, rabbits, and foxes. Unlike Father, he was lenient with his sons, which explained their boldness. As they grew older, both brothers became meaner. They began to steal pears, oranges, and watermelons from villagers in the evenings; they even disrespected and sometimes quarreled with elders. Occasionally, they invited me to join them in stealing fruits and afterwards, we divided what we stole. Many elders resented this and cursed, "May thunderstorms electrocute you rascals and may cars knock you down!"

The curse was to come true! During the Lunar New Year of 2001, Yao Zhiqiang visited his uncle's home with his brother. Yao Zhiqiang put firecrackers in a glass bottle and lit them but, before he could escape, the bottle exploded. His right hand was so badly injured that it had to be amputated. The associated medical costs plunged his family deeply into debt. The two brothers then quit school.

"He deserved it! The gods punished the right person this time!" some old ladies exulted.

I was shocked when Father told me about Yao Zhiqiang's tragedy. "Don't spend time with those two brothers or you'll end up like Yao Zhiqiang." Father said. "His father has two sons, but I have only you. I don't want you to be injured or disabled. Do you understand?"

I soon stopped visiting my heroes not because of Father's admonition, but because of what happened two weeks after I

enrolled in Dry Wood Junior Middle School. My head teacher, Ms. Guo, taught us Chinese, and asked us to keep diaries and to practice calligraphy. She said, "Keeping a diary is a great way to improve writing skills. You will have a better future if we can write Chinese characters well."

In order to keep us engaged in keeping dairies and practicing calligraphy, Ms. Guo announced, "Attention, please! From today on, I will check and evaluate your diaries and calligraphy every day. Those who get an A three days in a row will be awarded an exercise book with my autograph. Those who get a C three days in a row will have to clean the classroom."

I wanted to get exercise books signed by Ms. Guo, which would give me a sense of achievement and also save some money, which I could then use to buy snacks. Each afternoon after I returned from school, I spent around three hours writing my diary and practicing calligraphy.

Ms. Guo soon recognized my hard work, gave me many top marks, and awarded me a number of exercise books. Only about six students had the honor to visit Ms. Guo's office every weekend to get exercise books, and I was among the group almost every time. Occasionally I got a B and some suggestions on how to write Chinese characters more beautifully. After a month, the notebook that I used for my diary was nearly full. One Friday afternoon when several classmates and I went to Ms. Guo's office to receive exercise books, Ms. Guo asked me to wait for a bit. After my classmates had received their awards and left, Ms. Guo smiled and said, "I'm not going to award you an exercise book, instead..." and took a thick beautiful notebook out from a drawer of the desk and showed it to me.

"Wow, beautiful!" I thought, trying to contain my excitement. "It must be very expensive," I guessed.

Ms. Guo placed the notebook in my hands and said, "I know you need a new notebook, so I bought this one yesterday morning. I hope you continue to observe things happening around you and write about them."

I nodded gratefully. As I was about to leave, Ms. Guo said, "Wait a minute, here is a copy book of calligraphy I used before, please take it. It will help you."

I was so moved that I almost cried. At that moment, I felt like I was the luckiest student in the world.

Ms. Guo's encouragement and generosity stimulated my interest in studying. This surprised Father, who also encouraged me, but in another way. He said, "Keep practicing calligraphy. If you can write beautiful characters, you can write and sell couplets during Spring Festival."

Meanwhile, the Yao brothers were becoming increasingly upset with me. After leaving school, they joined their father in hunting, had no playmates, and began to keep some animals they hunted, particularly snakes, as pets. Occasionally, the brothers invited me to see their pets, but I was afraid of snakes and was also busy, so I refused.

"Come on! Sitting still all day writing is no fun. Come see our pretty snakes, I'm sure you'll love them," Yao Zhiwei insisted when he visited me one afternoon.

"I don't like snakes. They aren't pretty. They're scary," I replied coldly, wanting him to leave.

Yao Zhiwei then angrily went home.

The next afternoon when I went to the toilet behind my family's pigsty I was terrified by the sight of a two meter long white snake lying in front of the toilet door. It was the biggest snake I had ever seen. I screeched and ran.

"Ha, ha, ha!" sounded behind me. I turned and saw the Yao brothers leaning against the pigsty.

"Coward! You're even afraid of a dead snake!" Yao Zhiqiang bellowed, then picked up the snake with a stick and tossed it at me.

Anger welled up inside me. I gritted my teeth and clenched my fists. "Get that snake out of my sight, or I'll tell my father," I said.

"Ha! We aren't afraid of your stupid, beggar father," Yao Zhiwei replied.

Aware that I was alone, I stopped arguing and went inside my house.

The Yao brothers caused more trouble. During the daytime, when Father was out farming and I was at school, they broke into our house through my bedroom window and stole my new tape-recorder and pens. Lady Yang witnessed the burglary and told

Father, who was so annoyed that he went to the brothers' home and retrieved the tape-recorder. Before leaving their home, Father said to Yao Mingguang, "If your sons break into my house again, I'll call the police."

"OK. OK. Sorry. I'll punish them," Yao Mingguang said. "But it's natural for children to make mistakes, right?"

I thought Father's visit would stop the Yao boys from troubling me but I was wrong. Instead, they intensified their bullying.

I was alone in my bedroom practicing calligraphy one drizzly Wednesday evening when my bedroom door suddenly flew open with a bang and the Yao boys entered, both leering at me. I was shocked and the pen dropped from my hand to the floor. "Get out!" I shouted

"What if we don't?" Yao Zhiwei said, glaring at me.

"We'll leave after you apologize for telling on us about taking your recorder," Yao Zhiqiang said.

"It's not me that told on you. You stole my tape-recorder, and now you want me to apologize to you! How ridiculous," I said furiously.

"Brother! Look at this beautiful book," Yao Zhiwei said picking up the copy book Ms. Guo had given me.

"Yes, it is beautiful," Yao Zhiqiang said.

"Put it down! It's mine!" I screeched, got up from the chair, and grabbed for the book

"It belongs to me now," Yao Zhiwei said, holding the book above my head.

Yao Zhiqiang then went to a corner near my bed and curiously poked a sandbag hanging in the air with his index finger. Father had made it for me, hoping I would punch it everyday and become stronger.

"What's this?" Yao Zhiqiang said, patting the sandbag. I refused to answer. Yao Zhiqiang then untied the rope above the sandbag, which made the sandbag plop to the floor heavily, scattering sand everywhere.

Witnessing such a mess, I could no longer control myself. I rushed at Yao Zhiqiang, punched his face hard, and howled. As I was about to punch him again, Yao Zhiwei grabbed my hands. Yao

Zhiqiang kicked my stomach. I bit Yao Zhiwei's hand, managed to free myself, rushed out of the house into the rain, looking for help.

I was soon drenched, but I kept running with the Yao brothers in hot pursuit. I decided to run to Yao Beibei's house because Father often helped his grandmother fetch water there.

Several adult villagers were chatting on the porch of Yao Beibei's house, including Yao Mingguang. I ran up to them, pointed at Yao Mingguang, and cried, "His sons are bullying me. Please stop them!"

Annoyed by my interruption, Yao Mingguang gestured for me to leave. Just as I returned to the rain, I was caught and kicked to the wet, muddy ground. Yao Mingguang shouted at his sons to stop, which had no effect. The boys continued punching me hard. I rolled in pain, tears and rain coursing down my cheeks.

"Stop! Stop!" Father suddenly shouted. He had just returned from farming work.

Yao Zhiqiang and Yao Zhiwei fled. "I have told you dozens of times not to spend time with those two bastards, but you just don't listen. You asked to be bullied today," Father scolded. He then turned to the villagers chatting on the porch and shouted, "What's wrong with you? Why didn't you stop them?"

"Do we have the duty to protect your son?" Yao Beibei's grandmother replied.

"All right, old woman, don't ask for my help again. Maomao, get up and let's go home," Father said.

When I got home, I locked myself in my bedroom and wept. I wrote about the incident in my diary and mentioned how I longed for revenge. Father forced his way into my room to console me before I went to bed. "Money is power. I don't have much money, so we are denigrated by others," Father said, "Sorry, Son, for being unable to protect you," and then he hugged me and wept.

I had a terrible dream that night: I killed the Yao boys using a dagger while they slept, and then I was put in prison for the remainder of my life.

I couldn't concentrate in class the next day because I kept thinking about being bullied and how to take revenge. Ms. Guo came up during a class break, patted my shoulder, and said, "Come to my office after school."

I went to Ms. Guo's office after school, my heart pounding.

"I read your diary and know how you feel, but revenge is not a good idea. I hope you will give it up," Ms. Guo said.

"They bullied me very badly," I interrupted.

"I know. Now may I tell you a story?" Ms. Guo said.

I nodded my head and Ms. Guo continued:

In the early Western Han Dynasty, there was a famous general called Han Xin. He was admired by thousands of people, but when he was a teenager, he was poor and was often attacked by local hooligans. The leader of the hooligans decided to humiliate Han Xin by forcing him to crawl between his legs. Crawling between someone's legs was a great shame for a young man, but Han Xin knew that if he refused, he would suffer even more, so he did as the hooligan leader demanded, which made all the onlookers laugh and ridicule him as a coward. Han Xin worked hard every day afterwards, and was determined to become a hero instead of a coward. In the end, he became a very famous general by helping the emperor win many battles. People no longer scorned him; instead, he was admired by all.

"The two boys in your village humiliated you terribly by bullying you in the rain, but who was more dishonored: you or Han Xin?" Ms. Guo said.

"Han Xin," I answered.

"OK. Did he take revenge?" Ms. Guo said.

I shook my head.

Ms. Guo said, "Right. Han Xin was disgraced, but he didn't take revenge because he understood that the poor are easy prey for bullies. He bore the shame, worked hard, and became a famous general. Maomao, I hope you give up the idea of revenge and learn from Han Xin. Study hard and you'll no longer be humiliated by your neighbors when you graduate from college in ten years."

"Thank you, Ms. Guo," I said gratefully.

AN AMATEUR ELECTRICIAN

Electricity came to our village in the 1990s and made a great difference in our lives. Electric light bulbs, TVs, VCD and DVD players, telephones, and electric pumps brought more convenience. But there were also challenges. Most of the younger villagers worked in large southern cities, most elders were illiterate, and villagers didn't know how to solve the inevitable problems that accompanied having electricity. Mr. Yao Wenge, who was about fifty years old, was a good electrician, but he charged at least ten RMB when someone asked him for help. Father occasionally asked Mr. Yao for help, but could not pay him the fee. This upset Mr. Yao, who then asked Father to do farm work for him.

I sympathized with Father and others unable to deal with electrical problems. Meanwhile, I was jealous of Mr. Yao and wanted to be able to solve electrical problems as well as he did. The chance came when I was in grade two of junior middle school and began to study physics taught by a young man, Mr. Ma, who had just graduated from college. In the first class, he said, "You will learn a new subject beginning today - physics. If you learn it well, you'll have a better chance to enroll in a good senior middle school and your life will be better. We will learn about electricity, energy, and so on."

Mr. Ma chose me to be the class representative with my main task being to take exercise books to his office. This gave me an opportunity to talk to Mr. Ma. I asked how to make a light bulb work and how to repair electric cables. Mr. Ma was very patient and demonstrated answers to my questions.

Father hauled rice to be husked to a village about a half-kilometer away, requiring labor and time. In 2002, Father sold rice to merchants, earned some money, and bought a rice-husker. I volunteered to help connect the village electricity to the rice husking machine. I read the instruction book carefully and followed the outlined steps. When I plugged it in, the machine engine roared,

exciting both Father and me. Father bought pliers, screwdrivers, and wrenches for me to maintain the husking machine. He was now my assistant, which gave me a sense of pride.

Neighbors quickly learned we had an electric rice-husker and brought rice to our home to be husked. I charged one RMB per sack of rice, which gave me money to buy supplies and snacks at school. My favorite snack was toasted sunflower seeds flavored with star of anise.

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In 2003, Mr. Yao Wenge went to work in Guangzhou. Elders then felt abandoned because they had depended on him to solve their electrical problems. Afterwards, a growing number of people asked me to help them replace light bulbs and repair broken electric cables and switches. These things were not at all challenging for me and I then realized how powerless old villagers were. When I solved problems, old villagers praised and thanked me. Some offered peanuts, eggs, and oranges. I then told them it was my pleasure to help them. Indeed, I felt very glad to help villagers.

Lady Yang, Grandfather's next-door neighbor, asked me for help nearly every week. She led a miserable life with her adopted granddaughter, Tongyu, whose parents had abandoned her just after she was born because they had wanted a boy. Lady Yang's husband died of tuberculosis in 2000, and her son, a gambler, had gone to Guangzhou and never sent her a single *yuan*. In order to survive, Lady Yang cultivated rice and vegetables, though she was over seventy. Additionally, she made and sold tofu at the rate of three *yuan* per kilo.

The electric mill Lady Yang used to grind soy beans often malfunctioned because it was old and worn-out. The desperate expression on her wrinkled face made me feel sorry for her. I replaced the old and twisted electric cables with new ones and removed ashes and dirt from the mill engine. Whenever I left her home, I said, "Grandmother, don't hesitate to ask me for help next time."

In return, Lady Yang was kind to me and treated me like a member of her family. When she cooked delicious food like duck, chicken, and fish, she shared it with me. She also allowed me to

watch TV at her home because my family did not have a TV. These were all great rewards.

One evening, Lady Yang brought a bowl of chopped, spicy duck to my home and praised me to Father. She then said, "Maomao is just two years older than my granddaughter. Tongyu is beautiful and hardworking. Why not allow Maomao and Tongyu to marry when they grow up? I'm sure they'll be a perfect couple."

I was embarrassed. Father smiled and said, "Thank you for being willing to give Tongyu to Dalong. You know how poor I am, and I'm afraid no girl would want to marry him"

Lady Yang then turned to me and said, "What do you think of this idea, young man?"

I felt my face burning, and didn't know what to say. I was only fourteen and knew little about marriage.

Father came to the rescue and said, "Lady Yang, it's probably too early to discuss marriage with a fourteen-year-old boy. Let's wait until he's older."

Sadly, Lady Yang died of lung cancer in 2009. Tongyu immediately left senior middle school and went to work in Guangzhou. The last time I saw Lady Yang was the day when I first left home for college. She brought cooked eggs, peanuts, and peaches to see me off and said, "Maomao, knowledge is wealth that no one can take from you. Study hard in college. Tongyu and I will be right here waiting for you. My granddaughter will be yours when you return."

AN IMPORTANT EXAM

I was a grade three student at Dry Wood Junior Middle School in the early autumn of 2003 and would graduate in less than a year. Father had already planned my future. "I chatted with your great uncle the other day and he promised to use his connections to help you join the army," Father said as we were harvesting in the rice paddy one afternoon. "You'll learn a lot in the army."

"Oh, no! I want to go to senior middle school," I said. "Sister has promised to support me."

"Be reasonable! Going to senior middle school is expensive and useless. Even if you graduate from senior middle school, you won't get a good job. We've already bothered your sister for years. Now she's old enough to marry. She won't be able to support you once she is married," Father said impatiently.

"I don't want to be a soldier," I replied.

"Then you'll go work in Guangzhou. I'll ask your uncles and aunts to find a job for you," Father said.

I was upset after this conversation and couldn't concentrate on study. I had not realized that my schooling would end so soon. However, my head teacher, Mr. Zhang Jiabao, encouraged me. One evening after the bell rang, Mr. Zhang entered the classroom, went to the podium, and announced. "Dear pupils, here is some great news. The final examination is in three months. The examination is organized by the County Education Bureau and all the grade three junior middle students in our county will take it. Those ranking in the top 500 will be rewarded. They will be exempted from the senior middle school exam next June and will each be given a 1,000 RMB scholarship."

"Wow!" all my classmates gasped. I was ecstatic because I saw hope for my future. If I did well on the exam, I would have the chance to further my study without Sister's support.

I told Father the news when I returned home on Friday. "I'll enjoy free senior middle school education and probably go to college," I said dreamily.

"Stop daydreaming. Are you sure you'll rank among the top 500?" Father said scornfully. "You're like an unmarried man dreaming of a name for his unborn child!"

It would be hard to get this award because about 10,000 students would take the exam. I knew much hard work lay ahead of me for I wasn't even among the top ten in my class. I had never scored above eighty percent in arithmetic and physics. Nevertheless, I resolved to try. To have more study time, I decided to sleep in the school dorm room, which was in very poor condition. Father helped me take bedding to the dorm room where twelve boys slept, two boys per bed. The school didn't provide hot water or a bathroom, so we had to go to the electricity plant nearby to get hot water and to bathe.

We twelve boys were all grade three students and our homes were far from the school. Four of my dorm mates were also my classmates – Yao Shenjie and three other boys. Like attracts like; several classmates and I spent most of our spare time studying in the classroom while the other boys in our dorm room were often out playing computer games in local internet bars.

My roommate, deskmate, and bedmate was Yao Shenjie, whose home was even farther from school than mine. He also earnestly desired to perform well on the coming final exam. During a boring Chinese class, he gave me a note that said, "Let's work together to get the scholarship!"

I agreed. Yao Shenjie was talented in arithmetic and geometry, but did poorly in English and Chinese while I was good at Chinese and English, but poor in arithmetic and geometry. We helped each other. I often asked Yao Shenjie to help me solve arithmetic problems and I taught him English grammar and Chinese.

Classes ended at eight-thirty p.m., but Yao Shenjie and I usually stayed in the classroom for another two hours before going to bed. We understood we had to spend more time to catch up with the top students in our class.

Mr. Zhang occasionally came to the classroom and chatted with us. He asked about our family backgrounds and encouraged us. He told stories about some of his former students from poor families who later became successful, which gave us confidence.

Some dorm roommates were unhappy with Yao Shenjie and me. When they invited us to play computer games, we declined. My roommates usually went to bed at about nine p.m., while Yao Shenjie and I often returned to the dorm room at about ten-thirty. Some roommates complained that we disturbed their sleep. Yao Shenjie and I apologized and promised to make as little noise as possible when we returned, but some roommates were still unhappy. The dorm room door was locked one evening and no matter how hard we knocked, no one opened it. Finally, Mr. Zhang came and ordered my roommates to open the door.

The school held a mid-term examination in early November. To my great surprise and joy, I was number five in our grade, and number two in my class. Yao Shenjie ranked number five in the class. Mr. Zhang praised us both. "You are within reach of the scholarship now," Mr. Zhang said, and asked us to tell our fellow classmates how we were able to make such dramatic improvement.

I wrote to Sister about my progress in study. She was delighted and replied, "Dear Brother, I hope that you continue to study hard. I'm sure you'll succeed in the coming exam. I will always support you."

Father was happy, too. He had just sold a pig, bought good food to celebrate, and said, "Son, if you can get the scholarship, I'll buy a color TV for you." Color TVs were becoming popular in our village and I had asked Father to buy one, but he couldn't afford it.

When I was about to set off for school, Father handed me thirty RMB and said, "Studying must be very tiring because I find you are thinner than before. Use this money to buy whatever food you like," and then he waved goodbye.

Instead of buying food, I went to a bookstore in the township town and bought several reference books that provided detailed explanations and many exercises that proved very helpful in preparing for the exam. Yao Shenjie also bought some reference books and we frequently exchanged books.

Yao Shenjie and I chose to stay at school on weekends when the final exam neared. The school canteen didn't provide food on weekends, so we ate instant noodles. Mr. Zhang happened to see us having instant noodles in the classroom one Saturday evening and said, "Come to my home for lunch tomorrow!"

We summoned our courage the next day and went to Mr. Zhang's home, which was just twenty meters from our classroom. The pleasant aroma of cooking food tantalized our nostrils as we walked near his apartment. We heard folk music because Mr. Zhang liked listening to folk music and singing folksongs in his spare time. The apartment door opened as we were about to knock. "Ah! Here you are! I was just going to the classroom to find you," Mr. Zhang's wife, who taught in a kindergarten in the township town, said cheerfully.

"Come sit!" Mr. Zhang said, turning down the music. He then asked us how our preparation was going and said he hoped we might relax a little. He suggested Yao Shenjie and I play ping pong to entertain ourselves.

It was a very hearty lunch of fried eggs, pork, fish, Chinese cabbage, and seaweed soup. This was the first time for us to eat in a teacher's home. I was nervous and my hands wouldn't stop trembling. Yao Shenjie was not as nervous as I, but his face was noticeably red. Aware of our embarrassment, Mr. Zhang said, "Don't be nervous! Just treat my home as your home, and my wife and I as your parents."

The final examination came. The top thirty students in our grade had to go to Shijiang Township Junior Middle School to take it. We would represent Dry Wood Junior Middle School in competing against the top students from other junior middle schools in our county.

The results were announced a week later. To our surprise, Yao Shenjie was number one in our grade, and number fifty among all examinees in our county. Even he couldn't believe the result. I didn't do as well but was ranked number 492, which meant I would get the scholarship.

SISTER'S WEDDING

The spring Festival of 2004 was approaching. Sister wrote that she would return to celebrate the festival. I hadn't seen her for three years and eagerly awaited her arrival.

Father was also happy because he knew Sister would give him some cash and he could finalize her marriage. Sister was twenty and considered old enough to marry. Village parents whose unmarried daughters were more than twenty were ridiculed and Father didn't want to be belittled.

Locally well-known matchmakers occasionally visited Father and chatted about Sister and certain single young men. Father was very welcoming and treated these elder women with smoked pork, fish, and homemade liquor.

I disliked the matchmakers because I didn't want Sister to leave our home. "Will Sister continue to support my schooling if she gets married?" I asked Father one evening just after a matchmaker left.

"Of course, but she will also take care of her new home. Don't worry, I'll also support you," Father answered.

Sister was to return home on the second day of the first lunar month. Father and I woke very early that morning and walked to the township bus station to meet her. It was chilly and the seven-kilometer walk was tiring, but I didn't complain.

"Wow! Brother, you're even taller than me now," Sister said in surprise when we met.

"He's no longer a small boy. He's now a big young man," Father said. "How time flies. And you are old enough to find a husband..."

"Father, I don't want to marry too early," Sister mumbled.

"Too early? You're twenty. Your former classmate, Yao Guihua, is younger than you and already has a son," Father said sharply.

We began New Year visits the next day. All our relatives were happy to see Sister. While visiting Great Uncle, the secretary of the village Party committee, his mother volunteered to be Sister's matchmaker. Great Uncle's mother was the best-known matchmaker in our village and, though she was in her seventies, she was still energetic about matchmaking.

"There's a nice, rich young man surnamed Zhang in Black Dragon County. I'm sure you'll have a happy life if you marry him," she said to Sister. "I'll arrange the two of you to meet soon."

Great Uncle was the most important person in our village and his mother had helped Father marry Mother, so Father and Sister had to agree.

Great Uncle's mother visited our home three days later. "Tomorrow is the eighth day of the first lunar month and a very auspicious time for meetings. I telephoned Mr. Zhang and talked with him about you. Please come to town with me tomorrow to meet your future husband. I'll come get you in the morning," she said cheerfully to Sister.

Father and Sister got up at five-thirty the next morning. I didn't want to miss anything, so I also struggled to get up. When I saw Father and Sister in the kitchen, I was startled – Father was wearing a new black suit Sister had bought for him. I had never seen him so well-dressed before! Sister was wearing a fine yellow coat. I detected a light pleasant odor, which told me that she must have put on perfume.

"Father, are you also going to town?" I asked curiously.

Father nodded.

"Can I go with you?" I asked. "I want to see if Mr. Zhang is suitable for Sister."

"No. Stay at home. Thieves might break in if we are all away," Father replied.

"Brother, please stay at home and study. It's no fun to walk to town in this chilly weather," Sister said, comforting me.

"OK," I said reluctantly.

Great Uncle's mother came just as we finished breakfast, and then they left for town.

Father and Sister returned in the evening. I could hear them chatting merrily while approaching our home. I went out to welcome them, eager to hear about the meeting with Mr. Zhang.

"Sister, will you marry him?" I asked directly.

"I don't know," Sister said bashfully.

"Mr. Zhang is a nice, eloquent young man, though a little short. His family is rich. I think he'll be very successful in the future, so I agreed he could marry your sister. He'll visit us the day after tomorrow," Father said.

On the tenth day of the first lunar month, Mr. Zhang came to visit in a car with several of his relatives. I disliked him at first sight, as he was short, thin, and not at all manly. He was only about 150 centimeters tall - shorter than any adult man in our village. "How can Father agree to let this small, weak man marry Sister?" I wondered.

Grandfather and most villagers who saw Mr. Zhang had exactly the same thoughts. "It's impossible for such a short, weak man to do farm work and make a living at home!" Grandfather muttered disapprovingly to Father.

"Father, times have changed. Young people don't need to stay at home and farm. Mr. Zhang is working in a clothes factory in Guangzhou and making much more money than if he were farming," Father said in irritation.

Mr. Zhang had sensed the general negative atmosphere because few villagers welcomed him warmly. Nevertheless, he smiled at, greeted, and offered cigarettes to those he met on the path to our home. His relatives dutifully walked behind him, carrying a big box containing pork, fish, chicken, rice cakes, rice liquor, sugar, apples, and milk powder.

Mr. Zhang toasted during dinner, "Father, I came today to ask you to allow me to marry Jinmei. I promise I'll love her forever!"

"Good! Good! I'll give permission, but I need to prepare some new furniture and bedding. Please give me some money first," Father said directly.

Neither surprised nor unprepared, Mr. Zhang took a thick wad of one hundred *yuan* notes out of his pocket, handed it to

Father, and said, "I really want to marry your daughter, so money isn't a problem. Here's 20,000 RMB."

"All right, I now designate you as Jinmei's fiancé!" Father said happily. Then he turned to me and said, "Maomao, call Mr. Zhang 'Brother-in-law'!"

"Brother-in-law," I said to Mr. Zhang.

"Good Brother," Mr. Zhang replied, approached me, and gave me a red envelope containing one hundred RMB. "Please study hard. Your sister and I will support your study in the future," he said.

Mr. Zhang and Sister were thus engaged but, as they didn't know each other well, Father and Great Uncle's mother suggested the wedding be held during the next New Year period. Mr. Zhang and Sister both agreed. In order to be together with Sister, Mr. Zhang used his connections to get a job for her in the factory where he worked. Sister was happy to accept the job because she was bored working for the old couple. Though the old couple was kind, she was lonely and was attracted by the prospect of meeting young people in the factory, and of earning more money.

•••

A year passed quickly. Sister telephoned Father a month before Chinese New Year and said, "Father, I'm willing to marry Mr. Zhang now. He really cares about me. He has bought me a cell phone, a ring, and some beautiful clothes. He's also humorous and I'm happy to be his wife."

Father told Sister's decision to Great Uncle's mother, who then visited Mr. Zhang's parents. Great Uncle's mother and Mr. Zhang's parents then went to a fortuneteller, told him Sister's and Mr. Zhang's birthdates, and asked him to choose an auspicious day for the wedding.

"The fourth day of the first lunar month is an ideal time for this young couple to marry. They'll love each other forever and will have healthy children if they marry on this day," the fortuneteller said.

Father then told all our relatives about the wedding date and gave them invitations. On the third day of the first lunar month, more than fifty relatives came to our home, set off firecrackers, and

gave Father red paper envelopes containing money. On the appointed morning, Mr. Zhang and two of his brothers-in-law came to fetch Sister. They also brought gifts for Father, my paternal grandfather, Great Uncle, Uncle, and other relatives.

A big feast was held that afternoon that lasted for hours. Nearly all the adult men were drunk in the end, and Mr. Zhang was the drunkest because he had to toast each guest. Many visitors had left by evening, but close relatives such as my maternal grandparents, and maternal uncles and aunts remained. They would accompany Sister to Mr. Zhang's home the next morning. There were not enough beds for everyone, so some relatives stayed up all night playing mahjong or watching TV.

It was also a sleepless night for Sister, who sat quietly by the stove in the kitchen. She fully understood that she would belong to another family the next day. Maternal Grandmother sat near Sister and chatted with her. At some point, tears rolled down Grandmother's cheeks. "If your mother were alive, she would be so happy today," Grandmother said, making Sister sob.

Grandmother's words disturbed Father who said coldly, "Tomorrow is Jinmei's wedding day. Please don't say such unhappy things."

Three cars and a van came to take us to Mr. Zhang's home at dawn. Before Sister got in a car, she was asked to kneel in front of the shrine in the biggest room of our house and pray to our family ancestors for a happy marriage.

We reached a township town after about an hour's ride. Father, Mr. Zhang, and Uncle got out to buy furniture, bedding, and firecrackers. They returned with a truckload of items including a big color TV, a DVD player, a dressing table, a wardrobe, a refrigerator, a washing machine, fine quilts, blankets, and firecrackers. Then, we headed to Mr. Zhang's home in Zhang Family Village, which is situated in a valley with a winding river running nearby. The village has one hundred households and a large area of fields.

A crowd had assembled at the village entrance, awaiting our arrival and ran to welcome us. Firecrackers exploded and people began carrying the furniture and bedding into Mr. Zhang's home, a

two-story brick structure that was decorated with red lanterns and couplets.

A couple in their sixties stood by the courtyard gate and repeated, "Welcome! Welcome! Happy New Year!" I assumed they were Mr. Zhang's parents.

The wedding ceremony began soon after the furniture and bedding were arranged. The ritual was held in the house's biggest room that featured a shrine. One of Mr. Zhang's brothers-in-law acted as the host. Mr. Zhang's parents sat happily on chairs and Mr. Zhang and Sister stood before them.

"Bride and groom, please bow to Heaven and Earth, and then bow to your parents," the host intoned.

When Sister bowed to Mr. Zhang's parents, they were delighted and each gave Sister a red envelope with money.

"OK. Now bride and groom bow to each other and kiss!" the host said.

Mr. Zhang hugged Sister and kissed her, which made the crowd cheer boisterously.

A banquet was held after the ceremony. Father, Uncle, Grandmother, and I were honored guests and were invited to sit around the table nearest the shrine. Fish, pork, beef, mutton, chicken, rice, liquor, Chinese cabbage, eggs, peanuts, and candy were served.

Father was asked to deliver a speech before everyone started to enjoy the food. He stood and spoke loudly and cheerfully, "Distinguished guests, first of all, thank you for coming to the wedding. Today is the most memorable day for my daughter and Mr. Zhang. As a parent of the bride, words cannot express the joy I feel. I sincerely wish that Mr. Zhang and my daughter will help each other, always understand each other, and continue to be filial."

Sister and Mr. Zhang moved from table to table during the banquet, serving liquor to guests to show respect and appreciation.

The banquet lasted about three hours. Most adult men were intoxicated, including the drivers, so we stayed at Mr. Zhang's home until the next day. Fortunately, there were enough beds.

All of Mr. Zhang's family members, including Sister, saw us off the next morning. Father received such gifts as pork, fish, and candy, and Mr. Zhang's father gave me a red packet full of money.

I sat near Father in a car on the way home, and said, "It's so complicated and expensive for a man to marry. I won't marry in the future."

"Do you want our villagers to scorn me? You'll marry when you grow up. To marry and have children is your responsibility for our family," Father said.

CHEATED

In the summer of 2008, I was accepted by Suzhou Normal University, one of China's most important teachers' universities, to study in its free education program. Students in this program paid no fees for tuition and accommodation, and each student received a subsidy of 400 RMB each month for food and basic living expenses.

This was a truly marvelous opportunity for a student from an impoverished family. I didn't want Father to continue working day and night to pay for my study. He was older and entitled to a less stressful life. The night before I set off for Suzhou, I promised, "Father, from tomorrow on, I won't ask for even one *yuan* from you or Sister."

With great ambition and hope, I boarded a train to Suzhou City, where Suzhou Normal University is located. The moment I disembarked from the train, I was fascinated by the famous Suzhou City Wall, which is about four centuries old. Enroute to the university, the bus passed some ancient buildings. "I will visit all the places of interest in Suzhou," I silently vowed.

When I shared my plan with my three new roommates, they enthusiastically agreed and said they also wanted to visit the famous sites. I soon found, however, that my plan was impractical because visiting these sites required money and I had little money to spend. Many tourist attractions in Suzhou charged entrance fees, and the subsidy offered by the school was too little for me to pay for food and phone bills. I had to spend at least twelve RMB a day for food and fifty RMB a month for my phone.

I decided to look for a part time job in order to make ends meet and travel, but I knew no one in the city, so how could I find a job? "Perhaps a service company can help," I thought. Someone gave me a leaflet about an intermediary service company when my roommates and I were window-shopping one Saturday afternoon. I

was attracted because the leaflet said the company it advertised would find satisfactory jobs for customers.

I dialed the telephone number on the leaflet immediately after returning to campus. "Good afternoon, I'm a first year English major at Suzhou Normal University. Can you find a part time job for me?" I asked eagerly.

"Yes, we do have some job information for you. Please come to our company tomorrow morning," a woman said.

I dressed neatly the next morning and went to the intermediary service company, which was on the second floor of an old, dilapidated building. The stairs featured new and frayed posters on the walls and the steps were stained and littered with trash. People in the office were talking loudly when I knocked. When no one came to answer, I pushed the door open. "Excuse me, can I..." I began nervously.

"Are you looking for a job, young man?" said a woman sitting behind a cluttered desk. Other people in the office ignored me and continued chatting loudly.

"Yes. I phoned yesterday afternoon. I want a part time job," I answered.

The woman smiled, handed me a piece of paper, and said, "Please fill out this form and give me sixty-five *yuan* for our service."

"Sixty-five *yuan*! That's really expensive! But they'll get a job for me and I'll soon earn sixty-five *yuan*," I reasoned, filled out the form, and paid the woman.

"OK. Young man, here's the receipt," the woman said and smiled again. "We must provide you job information four times this month. If you want us to continue to help you next month, please pay another sixty-five *yuan*."

"No, I just need your help this month," I replied. "Now please give me job information!"

"A cell phone store near the town center is looking for people to pass out leaflets. You might be able to earn thirty *yuan* a day. Here's their phone number," she said and wrote the number on a notepad.

I took the number, thanked her, and left. When I phoned the cell phone store, I learned that I would have to work eight

hours a day passing out leaflets to passersby and the store wouldn't provide food.

I visited the office again and the same woman said, "A company needs a part time translator, but the condition is that the translator has to have passed level four of the Test for English Majors. Have you passed that exam?"

"No," I said.

"Then I'm afraid we can't help you today. Please come next time," she said coldly.

In the following two weeks, I visited the intermediary service company two more times, and each visit was fruitless.

Another week passed and soon National Day came. We would have eight days off. By the evening of September thirtieth, all my roommates had left to enjoy the holiday. One boy had gone home, one had gone to his aunt's home, and the third had gone to visit fellows from his home area, who also studied in Suzhou. I was alone.

I had nothing to do but read. There was a sudden knock on the door one afternoon. I put down the magazine I was reading and opened the door. "Good evening, my friend," said a thin man in his early thirties with a long scar across his right cheek that ran from his ear to the corner of his mouth, which seemed to give him a lopsided, perpetual smile. An extremely fat man stood behind him, a backpack on his back. The fat man waddled forward and greeted me with a wide smile, exposing very white, oddly canine teeth.

"May we come in?" the thin man asked.

I looked them over for a moment. Thinking they were not bad people, I let them in. The fat man closed the door. "Have a seat," I said. "I don't think I know you."

"We are also college students. I'm getting a PhD at Suzhou University, and my partner is getting a MBA at Central South University in Hunan."

"Why did you come to our university?" I asked curiously.

"We are looking for sale associates," the thin man answered. "We work part-time for a company that publishes books and makes pens, notebooks, and so on. There are around 20,000 students in your university and they all need books and stationery, so your university is a great market for our company."

Judging from the thin man's accent, I guessed he was from my home province. "Are you from Hunan?" I asked.

"Yes. We both are from Hunan," the thin man said, patting the plump man's shoulder.

"I'm from Hunan, too!" I said, delighted to meet two home fellows in Suzhou. We then began chatting in Hunan dialect. I soon learned they were from a county about a hundred kilometers from my home. The thin man's name was Zhang Wan, and the fat man's name was Liu Hu.

"Do you want to earn some extra money in your spare time?" Liu Hu asked.

"Of course. Actually, I have been looking for a part time job for weeks," I said honestly, hoping they might give me a job.

"Why not join us, buddy?" Zhang Wan suggested. "We're looking for someone to be our company's agent at your university."

"Great!" I said. "What would I do as an agent?"

"Sell our company's products to students. You can also hire your friends to help you," Zhang Wan replied.

"How much will you pay me then?" I asked eagerly. This was the most important question.

"It depends on how much you sell. You'll get forty percent of the total sales, so the more products you sell, the more you earn," Zhang Wan said.

"Believe me, you'll earn at least 1,000 RMB a month," Liu Hu added.

"One thousand RMB! Amazing! I'll be the richest student in my class!" I thought.

"I'm in!" I said decisively.

"Excellent! We'll now return to our company and ask them to issue a permission certificate for you, and then we'll come and give it to you tomorrow. You now need to pay the 300 RMB fee," Zhang Wan said.

"Pay 300 RMB in advance? How can I trust you? What if you don't come tomorrow?" I said, afraid that they would cheat me.

"Come on, buddy!" Liu Hu said in a strained tone. "We are Hunan fellows! How could we possibly cheat people from our home province?"

I was still reluctant to pay. Three hundred RMB was a lot. Sensing my unwillingness, Zhang Wan leaned forward and said, "It's natural to not trust people you've just met once. How about this? We'll leave our backpack and ID cards in your dorm room and get them when we give you the certificate tomorrow?"

"That's a good idea," I said.

Zhang Wan and Liu Hu handed me their ID cards. Liu Hu put down the backpack on the floor, opened it and took out some notebooks and pens. "See! These are our company's products. They are good quality and I'm sure you will sell them very easily," Liu Hu said, handing me some notebooks and pen.

"Not bad," I said after examining the notebooks. "OK, I'll go to the ATM near the school supermarket to get the money. Please wait. I'll be back soon."

I returned to my dorm room fifteen minutes later and handed them the money. "Come with the certificate tomorrow!" I said as they left.

"No problem!" they both chorused delightedly. I then escorted them to the university gate and waved goodbye.

When I returned to the dorm room, I decided to see what else was in the backpack. To my dismay, the backpack was full of poor quality pens and notebooks that were unlike the ones Liu Hu had shown me earlier. I opened the drawer to find their ID cards. They were gone. Zhang Wan and Liu Hu must have obviously taken them when I was out withdrawing money. I telephoned them, but their mobile phones were powered off. I realized I had been swindled.

"Brother, don't trust others easily. Be careful! Society is a jungle full of dangers," Sister said when I phoned her and told her of my misfortune.

20

A RAMBUNCTIOUS PORK CHOP

I finally got a job during the summer after my second year of college. It was very unexpected. I was walking near my campus and met a taxi with a flat tire parked on the side of the road. A foreign couple, who I guessed were in their sixties, were speaking American English to the driver, who obviously knew no English; the couple certainly didn't know any Chinese. Thinking that I might be able to help, I approached the couple and asked what the problem was.

The man, who I later learned was Mr. Ferman, a retired pharmaceutical salesman, said, "We are headed into town from the airport. We are here to see the sights! We know the driver has a flat tire. I was just asking if there was anything I could do to help him. I've been driving for years and know how to change a flat tire, but I can't figure out his jack."

"Uh...wh at's a jack?" I asked.

Mr. Ferman then communicated using gestures that it was something that raised the car and pointed to an object on the ground near the flat tire.

I explained this to the driver, who was greatly relieved. I helped the driver and we soon replaced the flat tire with the spare tire, which was bald as an egg, but was nevertheless good, I guessed, for several more kilometers. I chatted with Mr. and Mrs. Ferman and learned that she was retired after having worked for more than thirty years in a physician's office keeping records and scheduling appointments. Her hobby was painting watercolors of birds.

Mr. Ferman said he didn't have any hobbies other than sitting in a large brown chair he had bought. He said he liked the chair because it rocked and vibrated. He added that cold beer tasted better when he was sitting in the chair than any other place.

It was their first visit to China. They were grateful for my help and invited me to dinner at their hotel later that night as a way of saying thank you.

I agreed and arrived at their hotel at seven p.m. They were waiting in the lobby and we went into the hotel restaurant together and had a nice dinner. We had a chef's salad made from tomatoes slices, lettuce, cucumbers, bits of crushed garlic, some rings of raw round onion, fresh coriander, and some grated cheese. I chose Italian dressing for my salad. I didn't like the cheese so I picked it out. We also had pork chops, mashed potatoes, and green beans. It was OK.

When I was cutting my pork chop, it jumped off the plate and landed on the tablecloth. Mr. and Mrs. Ferman laughed good-naturedly, and Mr. Ferman joked, "It ain't dead yet!" jabbed it with his fork, put it back on my plate, and helped me cut it up into bite-size morsels.

I liked the desert – apple pie with a ball of white ice cream on top that had some lines of chocolate syrup. I wanted more chocolate syrup on the ice cream but I didn't say so.

We enjoyed each other's company so much that they asked me to go with them for the remainder of their travel in China. I was glad to do so because I was bored to death during the holiday staying on a lifeless, nearly-empty campus. When they left for the United States, they urged me to contact them and I did. We have stayed in touch now for more than a year. I hope they will visit again. It's nice to talk to them on Skype and exchange emails. I can practice my English with them and I like to talk to them. Mrs. Ferman even sent me one of her watercolors, which shows a woodpecker with a bright red head pecking at an old post for his breakfast. I framed it and put it above my bed to remind myself to get up early in the morning.

When I told them what my father said about shooting stars, Mrs. Ferman said, "Living requires dying, dying requires living. We know that your shooting star will streak across the sky years after our stars have made their brief mark. And we feel sure your shooting star will be bright and noticed by many."

I didn't know what to say, but somehow I felt complimented, comforted, and encouraged.

CHINESE TERMS

B

Beijing 北京

C

Changsha City 长沙市

Chen Huahua 陈花花

Chongqing 重庆

Cui Zhang 崔张

D

Dong 犀

Lake Dongting 洞庭湖

F

Five Great Mountains 五岳

G

Guangdong 广东

Guangxi 广西

Guangzhou 广州

Guizhou 贵州

H

Han Dynasty 汉代

Han Xin 韩信

Hubei 湖北

Hunan 湖南

J

Jiangsu 江苏

L

Lady Yang 杨氏

Li Zhidong 李芝冬

Liu Hu 刘虎

M

Ma Qi 马琦

Ma Zhe 马哲

Mao Zedong 毛泽东

Maomao 毛毛

Miao 苗
Mr. Chen 陈先生
Mr. Long 龙先生
Mr. Ma 马先生
Mr. Zhang 张先生
Ms. Guo 郭女士

N
Northern Heng Mountain 北岳恒山

R
RMB 人民币

S
Shanxi 山西
Shao Mountain 韶山
Shenzhen 深圳
Shijiang Township 石江镇
Southern Heng Mountain 南岳衡山
Suzhou 苏州
Suzhou Normal University 苏州师范大学

T
Tiananmen 天安门
Tujia 土家

W
Wang Jing 王静
Wu Jinmei 吴金梅
Wu Long 吴龙
Wu Yangyang 吴洋洋
Wu Zhiyuan 吴志远

X
Xiang River 湘江
Xuefeng Mountains 雪峰山

Y
Yan Xihuang 阎锡黄
Yangzi 长江
Yao 瑶
Yao Beibei 姚贝贝
Yao Cai 姚蔡

Yao Chang 姚畅
Yao Cong 姚聪
Yao Danghua 姚当花
Yao Daoguang 姚道光
Yao Faming 姚发明
Yao Gua 姚瓜
Yao Guihua 姚桂华
Yao Jiajia 姚佳佳
Yao Jiawei 姚佳伟
Yao Lanfang 姚兰芳
Yao Liwen 姚立伟
Yao Mingguang 姚明光
Yao Pan 姚潘
Yao Shenjie 姚申杰
Yao Tongyu 姚彤宇
Yao Wenge 姚雄
Yao Zhiqiang 姚志强
Yao Zhiwei 姚志伟
Yao Zhougai 姚周盖
Yin Dalong 尹大龙
yuan 元

Z

Zhang Jiaba 张家宝
Zhang Lan 张岚
Zhang Lei 张磊
Zhang Rui 张瑞
Zhang Wan 张万
Zhang Wan 张湾
Zhang Yu 张宇
Zhu Maichen 朱买臣